

PRELUDE TO OPERATION CAST LEAD

ISRAEL'S UNILATERAL DISENGAGEMENT TO THE EVE OF WAR

This chronology tracks the political milestones and critical events on the ground relevant to Gaza, beginning with Israel's decision to withdraw from the Strip and continuing to the eve of Operation Cast Lead, when Israel reentered Gaza in force. The aim is to give the reader historical context for the operation, particularly to place it within Israel's broader strategy toward final status. It was compiled by Michele K. Esposito from the journal's quarterly Chronologies, Peace Monitors, and Quarterly Updates from November 2003 through January 2009. Details and specific references can be found in those sections in JPS issues 131-51.

November 2003: First Inklings of Disengagement

By 11/03, the peace process had reached an impasse, leading Israeli PM Ariel Sharon to begin speaking of unilaterally setting Israel's borders and announcing plans to "disengage" from the peace process. After preliminary secret meetings in Rome between Sharon and U.S. National Security Council (NSC) Middle East adviser Elliott Abrams (11/17), Sharon's chief of staff Dov Weisglass (11/23) met with U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in Washington to lay out a 2-stage "disengagement plan" drafted by Sharon for U.S. Pres. George W. Bush's approval: In **phase 1**, the U.S. and Israel would agree on the "nonviability" of the new Palestinian Authority (PA) government (under PM Ahmad Qurai') with the expectation that it would fall within 6 months, marking the definitive end of U.S.-Israeli efforts to implement the 4/30/03 road map plan, while in **phase 2**, Sharon would "fill the vacuum that is created" by unilaterally declaring Israel's borders, taking 60% of the West Bank. Publicly, Sharon warned (11/27) that if the PA failed to make concessions on road map implementation (as interpreted by Israel), Israel would take "unilateral steps" in the West Bank and Gaza to impose a solution, taking permanent control over some occupied territories.

December 2003-January 2004: Formal Planning for Disengagement Begins

On 12/28, Sharon appointed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, head of Israel's National Security Council and former chief of military planning, to oversee the drafting of a detailed unilateral

disengagement plan. Eiland worked through January 2004.

February 2004: First Mention of Gaza Withdrawal in Coordination with the U.S.

On 2/2, Sharon revealed that he had given orders for the "relocation" of 17 Jewish settlements in Gaza and 3 in the West Bank over the next 2 years and that the evacuated settlers (ca. 7,500) would be integrated into existing West Bank settlements, clarifying his assumption that "in the future there will be no Jews in Gaza." Implementation was expected to begin on 6/04 or 7/04, and Israel would explore whether the U.S. would finance the estimated \$2 b. in implementation costs. Later in the month (2/19) Weisglass briefed a senior-level U.S. State Dept. team on the unilateral disengagement plan and Israel's expectations of the U.S. quid pro quo for leaving Gaza; U.S. officials stressed that the talks were unofficial and that the U.S. was merely offering ideas to help Israel "think things through."

February-March 2004: Egypt Becomes Involved

Israeli Shin Bet chief Avi Dichter traveled to Cairo to brief (2/26) Egyptian officials on Sharon's plan. Egypt said that it would not object to an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip so long as it was a product of a negotiated Israeli-PA agreement, in keeping with the road map, rather than a unilateral Israeli act. After Egyptian intelligence adviser Omar Sulayman secretly traveled (3/8-10) to Israel and Ramallah to confer with Sharon and PA Pres. Yasir Arafat, the sides agreed to hold continuous follow-up talks on the disengagement's bilateral security aspects.

March–April 2004: Clearing Gaza of “Terrorists” before Withdrawal

On 3/2, the IDF announced plans to “eliminate as many terrorists as possible” in Gaza before unilateral withdrawal and stepped up operations across Gaza accordingly. Following a 3/14 Hamas suicide bombing in Ashdod port (launched from Gaza; 11 dead, 20 wounded), the IDF sealed all Gaza crossings except Rafah, shut the Erez industrial zone, and launched **Operation Continuous Story** targeting especially “top figures from all terror organizations.” Hamas spiritual leader **Shaykh Ahmad Yasin** was among those assassinated. [N.B.—All highlighted operations have been approved by the Israeli cabinet. For details on Israel’s military operations against Gaza, see “Israeli Military Operations against Gaza, 2000–2008” in this section.]

14 April 2004: Bush-Sharon Letters on Disengagement Redefine Final Status

On 4/14, Sharon and Bush exchanged letters relating to disengagement at a private meeting in the White House. Appended to Sharon’s letter were the key principles (but no timetable) of Israel’s unilateral disengagement plan. (See Special Document section in *JPS* 132 for these documents.) Bush’s letter, which represented a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, stated that it was “unrealistic” to return to the 1967 borders, that “existing major Israeli population centers” in the West Bank should stay under Israeli control, and that Palestinian refugees should not expect to return to their homes inside Israel. Bush’s letter pledged that the U.S. would “do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan” than the road map, promised to “preserve and strengthen Israel’s capability to deter and defend itself,” and endorsed Israel’s right to retaliate against targets in Gaza after its withdrawal. Three days later, after Bush’s 4/14 endorsement of Gaza disengagement, Israel assassinated (4/17) Yasin’s replacement as Gaza Hamas head, ‘**Abd al-‘Aziz Rantisi**, causing Israeli-Palestinian violence in Gaza to spike.

Late April–Early May 2004: Sharon and the U.S. Lobby for Disengagement

On 5/2, despite intensive lobbying by Sharon, the Likud party he headed soundly rejected his unilateral disengagement plan,

with 60% voting against. The U.S. called (5/2) the vote a “setback” but reiterated its support of the plan. On 5/3, Sharon survived a Knesset no-confidence vote (46–62) and pledged to present a revised disengagement plan in several weeks.

On 5/4, after receiving U.S. assurances that the Israeli-PA final status talks on refugees and settlements would go forward regardless of unilateral disengagement, the EU, Russia, and the UN allowed a qualified Quartet endorsement of the plan. Israel, however, emphasized that it would discuss security elements of disengagement only with the U.S. and that other Quartet members would have to confine their involvement to economic concerns. The U.S. (Bush on 5/11; U.S. Secy. of State Colin Powell on 5/15) urged PM Qurai’ and other Arab leaders who were angry about the plan to see it as an opportunity to move the peace process forward.

13–24 May 2004: Widening the Rafah Buffer Zone

With Gaza clashes escalating in the wake of Israel’s 4/17 assassination of Rantisi, Israel launched (5/13) a major bulldozing operation in Rafah (**Operation Rainbow**) to widen its s. Gaza buffer zone (the Philadelphia route).

May–June 2004: Sharon’s Revised Disengagement Plan

On 5/30, Sharon presented a revised draft of his 4/14 disengagement plan to make it acceptable to his cabinet while not alienating the U.S. Unchanged in objective (withdrawal from all settlements in Gaza, plus 4 small isolated settlements in the West Bank), the revision included a phased implementation requiring cabinet approval at each stage of the scheduled evacuation. The plan would require the demolition of evacuated settler housing and Egypt’s formal commitment to help maintain security in Gaza following withdrawal. Prior to the 6/6 cabinet vote on the plan, Sharon fired (6/4) 2 hard-line cabinet ministers (MKs Benny Elon and Avigdor Lieberman) to ensure passage. Although endorsing the plan, the cabinet emphasized that the approval was not for evacuation of Gaza settlements per se, but only of Israel’s “historic intention” to do so: final agreement would not be given until the vote on the first stage, which Sharon postponed to 3/05 as a concession.

June–August 2004: Growing Instability in Gaza

From 6/04 through 8/04, disengagement efforts stalled with increasing Israeli-Palestinian violence, Palestinian rocket fire (first fatal strike on 6/27 on Sederot, killing 2), and Palestinian infighting. Meanwhile, Israel conducted assassinations and house demolitions in Gaza, and on 6/28 it launched **Operation Active Shield**, which included, inter alia, massive bulldozing along Gaza's northern border with Israel.

Meanwhile, Arafat was increasingly losing control of security inside Gaza as divisions within Fatah grew and intra-Palestinian violence spiked in what was widely seen as an orchestrated attempt (likely engineered by Gaza strongman Muhammad Dahlan, Arafat's rival and former Gaza security chief) to capitalize on the disarray to usurp Arafat's authority. A number of incidents of lawlessness and Arafat's cosmetic changes to calm the situation and placate demands for reform further incensed Arafat's critics, prompting (7/17) the resignation of PM Qurai' (later rescinded) and sparking several days of massive armed demonstrations and riots across Gaza and in the West Bank.

September–October 2004: Escalating Israeli Efforts to Purge Gaza

Escalating tit-for-tat Israeli-Palestinian violence (stepped up Israeli assassinations, Palestinian rocket and mortar fire from Gaza into Israel, a double Hamas suicide bombing in Beersheba on 8/31 that killed 16 Israelis) led to major IDF raids on Khan Yunis (9/1) and Dayr al-Balah (9/2–3) and an air strike (9/7) on a Hamas training facility in Gaza City that killed 15 Hamas members. Starting from 9/8, the IDF launched three major cabinet-approved operations against Gaza—an **unnamed 4-day operation to widen the north Gaza buffer zone** (9/8–11) and **Operation Days of Penitence** (10/1–15) and **Operation King's Court** (10/24–26), targeting Gaza's "terrorist infrastructure"—that left more than 100 Palestinians dead and hundreds of homes demolished or severely damaged. In the period of violence between the operations, the IDF assassinated (10/21) **Adnan al-Gul**, a founding member of Hamas and second in command of the Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades (IQB).

Late October 2004: The Knesset Approves Disengagement

On 10/26, after 2 days of debate, the Knesset approved (67–45, with 7 abstain-

ing and 1 absent) the disengagement plan, with half of Likud MKs and most ultranationalist and religious MKs (Likud's traditional allies) voting against it. Sharon fired 2 Likud cabinet ministers who voted against it, and the National Religious Party withdrew (11/8) from the governing coalition, leaving Sharon in control of only 55 of the Knesset's 120 seats.

November 2004: Arafat's Death

Arafat's death on 11/11 was followed by low-level violence between Palestinian factions, disputing wings of Fatah, and various branches of the PA security forces that continued in Gaza through the end of the month. Arafat's leadership roles (of the PA, PLO, and Fatah) were divided among Mahmud Abbas (PLO), Faruq al-Qaddumi (Fatah), and Ahmad Qurai' (acting PA head until elections could be held in 1/05). The IDF pulled back from population centers in the West Bank and Gaza in preparation for Palestinian presidential elections, but within a week it resumed assassinations in the West Bank and, in Gaza, made a major 1-day incursion into Gaza's Bureij refugee camp (r.c.), and resumed wide-scale house demolitions along the Rafah border, prompting renewed Palestinian rocket and mortar fire from Gaza into Israel.

December 2004–Early January 2005: Ongoing Efforts to Purge Gaza

Escalating Israeli-Palestinian violence in Gaza (including a 12/11 joint Hamas-Fatah Hawks bombing of an IDF checkpoint on the Rafah border that killed 5 IDF soldiers, a 12/15 joint attack by Islamic Jihad [IJ] and the Fatah Hawks on an IDF post at Kissufim crossing that wounded 5 Israelis [4 of them soldiers]; and a 12/16 mortar barrage on an IDF guard post at a s. Gaza settlement injuring 11 IDF soldiers) prompted the IDF to launch 3 operations back to back: **Operation Orange Iron** (12/17–18) and **Operation Violet Iron** (12/22/04–1/2/05), both in the Khan Yunis area, and **Operation Autumn Wind** (1/2) in n. Gaza, all aimed at stopping Palestinian rocket fire into Israel.

Meanwhile, Sharon formed (1/5/05) a broader government (including Labor and United Torah Judaism) that controlled 66 of 120 Knesset seats, assuring support for the Gaza withdrawal plan.

9 January 2005: PA Presidential Elections

PLO head Mahmud Abbas of Fatah was elected PA president by a solid margin; he immediately called for a resumption of peace talks and cease-fire talks with Israel.

15–17 January 2005: Immediate Israeli Pressure on Abbas

Before Abbas could be sworn in on 1/15, the AMB, Hamas, and the Popular Resistance Committees (PRCs) staged (1/13) a joint attack on Gaza's Qarni crossing, killing 6 Israeli civilians (including 2 Palestinian citizens of Israel). Israel suspended all contact with the PA (1/14) and ordered an IDF crackdown across n. and central Gaza, including air strikes on Dayr al-Balah and an incursion into al-Bureij. The next day the IDF launched **Operation Eastern Step** (1/15–1/17) in and around Gaza City to halt rocket fire.

Late January 2005: Abbas Secures a 1-Month Unilateral Palestinian Cease-Fire

After Operation Eastern Step, Abbas immediately went (1/18) to Gaza for consultation with the Palestinian factions. On 1/23 and 1/24 the factions announced a 1-month unilateral cease-fire in Gaza while talks continued on a long-term Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire and internal Palestinian power-sharing arrangements to govern prior to the 7/05 legislative elections (later postponed to 1/06). They also offered Israel a formal truce in exchange for ending assassinations; Israel responded only that it would "meet quiet with quiet" but formally resumed contacts with the PA broken off 1/14. Cease-fire and security coordination talks opened immediately under Egyptian auspices. On 1/28, Israel ordered a halt to IDF "offensive operations" in Gaza. Violence in Gaza declined significantly but did not cease.

Meanwhile, Gaza held its first round of municipal elections on 1/27. Hamas took 7 of 10 municipalities and 77 of 118 seats up for vote, compared to Fatah's 3 municipalities and 26 seats.

February 2005: A Shaky Cease-Fire Is Extended and a Disengagement Timetable Takes Shape

Abbas and Sharon exchanged formal cease-fire pledges at a 2/8 summit in Sharm al-Shaykh, Egypt, hosted by Egyptian pres. Husni Mubarak and attended by Jordan's

King Hussein. Abbas agreed that "Palestinians will stop all acts of violence against all Israelis everywhere." Sharon vowed to "cease all military activity against all Palestinians anywhere" to the extent that the Palestinians halt violence (i.e., arms smuggling, operating tunnels on the Rafah border, and rocket manufacturing, according to clarification by an Israeli spokesman).

Despite initial difficulties (requiring Abbas to fire 10 PA security chiefs in Gaza for inadequate enforcement and to return to Gaza to secure renewed pledges from the factions), as well as a 2/25 suicide bombing in Tel Aviv (killing 5 Israelis) claimed by a Damascus-based IJ cell (disavowed by the factions in the occupied territories), the shaky cease-fire remained in place. Israel said it would continue to refrain from carrying out "initiated operations" to give Abbas a chance to assert security control in the territories, but it continued to shell Gaza residential areas.

Meanwhile, on 2/16, the Knesset agreed (59–40, with 5 abstentions) to fund disengagement from Gaza. On 2/20 the new cabinet approved (17–5) the Gaza disengagement plan; Sharon signed orders for a Gaza pullout to begin on 7/20/05. (The date was later moved to mid-8/05.)

March 2005: Groundwork for Israeli Withdrawal Begins

Under pressure from the Quartet, Israel (represented by Vice PM Shimon Peres) and the PA (represented by Dahlan, as civil affairs minister in the new PA cabinet) began to discuss post-disengagement economic and civilian cooperation in Gaza. Israel and the PA both refused for political reasons to coordinate the actual disengagement process (with Israel stressing the *unilateral* nature of disengagement so as not to legitimize the PA or have disengagement portrayed as a failure; and elements of the PA—less so Abbas—concerned that coordination would tacitly legitimize the occupation). Talks continued into 4/05, with Dahlan pledging (4/6) that the PA would do all it could to make disengagement easy for Israel. March 2005 marked the first month since the start of the al-Aqsa intifada that no Israelis were killed.

After extensive talks with Abbas, all Palestinian factions except the PRCs agreed (3/17) to extend the Gaza cease-fire through year-end 2005. PA and Israeli security forces in Gaza began conducting joint patrols.

As part of revived national unity efforts under Abbas, Palestinian factions began discussing the possible creation of an interim self-governing authority for Gaza after disengagement as part of a process of reviving the PLO and bringing Hamas and IJ into the organization. Serious discussion began on whether Hamas would accept a 2-state solution, recognize Israel's existence, or agree to suspend armed struggle as part of the deal.

April 2005

With an Israeli timetable now set, former World Bank head James Wolfensohn was appointed (4/14) Quartet special envoy to oversee civilian aspects of disengagement and a smooth transition to PA rule in Gaza, including rallying international donors to pledge aid to support rapid job creation and reconstruction in Gaza after Israel's pullout. Security-related coordination was delegated to U.S. army Lt. Gen. William Ward, appointed as U.S. special coordinator for security related matters on 2/7.

Meanwhile, the truce was interrupted when the IDF's fatal shooting (4/9) of 3 Palestinian children playing soccer near the Rafah border triggered 2 days of heavy Palestinian rocket fire into Israel in a "one-time response." Israel said it would not retaliate. Although the AMB, IJ, and the PRCs announced (4/13) that they would no longer abide by the truce, Hamas reiterated (4/13) its adherence. In late 4/05, PA security forces in Gaza began arresting Palestinians for suspected truce violations, but overall, Gaza violence remained at a low level through mid-May.

During this period, serious splits within Fatah in Gaza became apparent. PA security forces loyal to former Gaza security chief (and current PA Civil Affairs M) Dahlan rallied in a show of force to protest Abbas's recent forced retirement of 100s of security officers as part of security reform plans pressed by Israel and the U.S.

May 2005

A brief spike in Gaza violence followed the IDF's fatal shooting (5/18) of a Hamas member on the Rafah border, which triggered Hamas mortar fire on Jewish settlements in Gaza and a joint attack (5/20) by AMB, Hamas, and IJ on Kefar Darom settlement (no injuries in either incident). On 5/21, PA Interior M Nasr Yusuf intervened

with Hamas, securing its commitment to restore the truce.

The PA complained (5/25) that Israel was not facilitating discussions on firm understandings of post-disengagement steps needed to empower the PA in Gaza (e.g., allowing construction of a port and airport, PA assumption of border control, economic and physical reconstruction), implementation of road map provisions, or resumption of final status peace talks.

Gaza held (5/5) its second round of municipal elections, with Hamas winning control of Bayt Lahiya and Rafah and securing 64% of the overall vote in 2 rounds of voting. Angry over the results, the PA attempted to nullify the results and call for a new vote, but Egypt intervened.

June-July 2005

Gaza's security situation deteriorated sharply as of the second week in June, when IJ, reacting to the IDF's 6/7 fatal shooting of an IJ member in the West Bank and its arrest of some 300 IJ members the previous month, targeted IDF units and Israeli settlements in Gaza (with some participation from Hamas and Fatah offshoots). Israel again launched assassinations of IJ members, and although PA intervention secured an IJ pledge (6/23) to restore the truce, violence resumed the next month when Israel staged (7/10) a failed assassination attempt on a senior IJ commander in Gaza City.

An IJ suicide bombing in Netanya on 7/12 (5 Israelis dead, 46 wounded) brought to a definitive end the 2/8 Sharm al-Shaykh truce, with Israel launching a "sustained campaign" against IJ and Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza and massing (as of 7/16) troops on the n. Gaza border, threatening to launch **Operation Summer's End** (a major operation planned in May to deal a decisive blow to Gaza's "terrorist infrastructure") while the factions stepped up rocket and mortar fire (1 Israeli in Israel killed, 15 settlers in Gaza wounded). Abbas placed (7/14) PA security forces in Gaza on high alert, ordering them to prevent any attacks on Israelis. PA security forces honed in on Hamas instead of IJ, sparking heavy clashes in Bayt Lahiya and Gaza City (2 bystanders killed, 5 Hamas and 4 PA security wounded). Hamas accused the PA of using IJ's violence as a pretext to launch a preemptive campaign to disarm Hamas.

Meanwhile, preparations for disengagement were proceeding. On 6/9, the Israeli

High Court ruled (10-1) that Sharon's disengagement plan was legal and in the national interest. In June, the IDF announced plans to begin collecting weapons from Gaza's 8,500 Jewish settlers, and in July, Israel began constructing 2 additional security fences along the length of the Gaza border (1 of razor wire and 1 with electronic sensors and surveillance cameras); it claimed that these measures were needed to ensure Israeli security after disengagement.

Early August 2005

Two weeks before disengagement on 8/17, Israeli and PA security forces in Gaza began close logistical coordination, though Israel refused to tell the PA the pullout's exact start date until 5 days beforehand. Envoys Wolfensohn and Ward urged closer post-disengagement planning between Israel and the PA, stressing that disengagement would succeed only if Gaza's economy could recover, necessitating Israel's guaranteeing reliable movement of goods and people across Gaza's borders. (In June, Wolfensohn had launched a campaign to raise \$3 b. from international donors for Gaza reconstruction, including a multimillion-dollar plan for a consortium of wealthy businessmen to buy settler greenhouses to turn them over to Gazans as a viable, self-sustaining economic enterprise.) By 8/14, the PA had completed deployment of 7,500 security officers across Gaza to prevent Palestinians from approaching the settlements during withdrawal.

17 August–12 September 2005: Disengagement

The evacuation of Gaza's settlers, begun on 8/17, was completed on 8/22 with very little violence beyond some scuffles between Israeli disengagement opponents and soldiers in the settlements. The IDF began dismantling the settlements as they were vacated, leaving nothing standing except the greenhouses not already destroyed by the settlers that Wolfensohn had arranged to purchase for the Palestinians. (Israel suspended talks led by Wolfensohn on 9/5, refusing to discuss post-disengagement economic guarantees.) Israel's military disengagement began immediately afterward, with the last troops withdrawn on 9/12. (Withdrawal from the 4 tiny West Bank settlements included in the disengagement deal was completed on 9/20.) Late on 9/11, before the last IDF troops departed, the Israeli

cabinet issued a formal decision declaring an "end of military rule" in Gaza.

Meanwhile, the Knesset rejected an Israeli-Egyptian protocol initiated on 8/15 under which Egypt would deploy an additional 750 border police on its side of the Rafah border after Israel's withdrawal from its buffer zone (the Philadelphi route) as part of disengagement, demanding instead an explicit formal pledge that Egypt would prevent the transfer of arms and ammunition to the PA via Egypt. After Israeli DM Shaul Mofaz convinced the Knesset and Israeli cabinet that the protocol as written made Egypt responsible, the two states signed it on 9/1. Additional Egyptian border police deployed on 9/10.

Late September–Early October 2005: Post-Disengagement

Gazans held massive victory rallies to mark Israel's withdrawal, flooding vacated settlements and overrunning the Rafah border to access Egyptian markets. Egyptian border guards initially fired warning shots at Palestinian crowds, killing 1; unable to control the situation, Egypt declared (9/13) a 5-day border opening as a goodwill gesture.

As Fatah and Hamas jockeyed to take credit for Israel's Gaza withdrawal, Palestinian factions, including Hamas and the AMB, declared (8/17, 8/20) that they would not agree to PA demands to disarm after disengagement. The open display of Hamas weapons at many celebratory rallies added to PA concerns. On 9/21, Abbas met in Gaza with all factions and secured their pledges to keep weapons off the streets and to acknowledge the PA civil police as the main keepers of law and order.

A week after Gaza disengagement was completed, the IDF, with Israeli cabinet approval, began (9/18) bulldozing a 200-meter deep buffer zone *inside* the n. Gaza border for construction of an electronic fence to run the length of the northern border; the IDF warned that anyone approaching the border zone, "even by mistake," would be fired upon. On 9/21, the Israeli Interior Min. approved an order declaring Gaza "foreign territory."

Shortly after the West Bank disengagement was completed on 9/20, Israel resumed (9/23) its assassination of West Bank IJ members, killing 3. This was followed by 2 volleys of Qassam 3s fired from Gaza by Hamas and IJ into Israel, for the first time reaching Ashqelon (wounding 5) and marking

the first post-disengagement cross-border strikes. Israel responded (9/23–24) with helicopter and F-16 air strikes on n. Gaza and assassinations of 3 Hamas members, and late on 9/24 launched **Operation First Rain** (9/24–10/2/05) to set the new “rules of the game” following disengagement.

During the operation, PA Interior M Yusuf ordered (9/27) Gaza security officers to arrest any armed Palestinian not in uniform. The attempt (10/2) by PA police in Gaza City to arrest the son of assassinated Hamas leader ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Rantisi sparked serious intra-Palestinian clashes (1 PA police officer and 2 bystanders dead, at least 50 Palestinians wounded), marking the first Palestinian infighting in Gaza since disengagement.

October 2005

For the first time since disengagement, Israel allowed (10/8) Palestinians to resume fishing within 9 nautical miles of the Gaza coast; opened (10/9) Qarni, Gaza’s main commercial crossing, allowing up to 250 trucks/day of imports—compared to 450 trucks/day pre-intifada—and up to 50 trucks/day of exports; and reopened (10/10) the Sufa commercial crossing (limits not reported). By 10/17, Israel suspended discussion on air and sea access to Gaza and safe-passage routes between Gaza and the West Bank until acceptable arrangements for reopening the Rafah crossing could be reached.

Another Israeli assassination of an IJ military commander followed by IJ rocket launchings (no damage or injuries) on 10/24 led to IDF air strikes and shelling, an IJ suicide bombing in Hadera (5 Israelis killed) on 10/26, and the launch that same day of **Operation Starting All Over Again** (10/26–30) to end “terrorism” in the West Bank and Gaza and reinforce the “new rules” post disengagement.

November 2005: Movement and Access

By mid-November, Quartet envoy Wolfensohn, frustrated over delays in talks to open the Rafah crossing (specifically citing the impediment of Israeli security demands), threatened to quit his post, prompting U.S. Secy. of State Condoleezza Rice, already in Israel to meet with Sharon and Abbas, to embark on all-night shuttle diplomacy to secure (11/15) the **Agreement on Movement and Access** and the **Agreed**

Principles for the Rafah Crossing (see Doc. A4 in *JPS* 138). The deal would allow the PA to open the Rafah crossing as soon as possible under EU oversight; Israel could observe the crossing real-time by remote camera and protest the entry of individuals (and order them held for up to 6 hours) but would not have ultimate veto power on entry. Israel pledged that the following would be allowed within 2 months: bus and commercial truck convoys between Gaza and the West Bank, 450 trucks/day of imports through Qarni crossing (its pre-intifada level), unimpeded agricultural exports from Gaza, and PA rehabilitation of the Gaza sea port into a major commercial transit point. The EU endorsed the plan on 11/21, and the PA began operating the Rafah crossing with EU monitors on 11/25.

Within days, Israel was complaining (11/30) about PA handling of the Rafah crossing, suspending (12/2) talks on safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank until improvements were made. (These talks were not resumed before Operation Cast Lead.) The IDF also unexpectedly shut Erez and Sufa crossings, citing nonspecific security threats, and heavily shelled the n. Gaza no-go zone. Meanwhile, the IDF was consolidating control of its new buffer zone inside the n. Gaza border, bulldozing Gaza land, reinforcing IDF border positions, and ordering closed military zones and recommending curfews inside Gaza.

On the Israeli domestic scene, Sharon, at the insistence of coalition partner Labor, called early elections (11/17) and dissolved parliament (11/21). At the same time, he announced (11/21) that he was leaving the Likud to form a new party, Kadima, which would run in the elections (set for 3/06) on the platform of defining Israel’s borders and dismantling Palestinian “terrorist organizations.” Several senior Likud members, including Ehud Olmert, and Labor’s Shimon Peres, also defected to join Kadima, giving the new party significant weight.

December 2005–January 2006: New Patterns Take Shape

In early December, the familiar pattern of Palestinian rocket fire (rarely if ever by Hamas), massive Israeli artillery fire and air strikes, more Palestinian rockets, and Israeli mock air raids to intimidate the population culminated in a 12/5 IJ suicide bombing in Netanya (killing 5 Israelis). This in turn led to the launch (12/5) of an Israeli

cabinet-approved **unnamed IDF operation** against Gaza (even though the suicide attack had originated in Jenin). The operation, which involved 96 airstrikes in two weeks, was superseded on 12/25 by **Operation Blue Skies**, launched after IJ fired a rocket strike on Ashqelon on 12/22, injuring 5 IDF soldiers. Both operations, nominally to halt Palestinian rocket fire, involved border sealings; firing on rocket launching sites; near-daily mock air raids; assassinations; and intensive shelling from artillery, helicopters, and gunboats. As of 12/25, the IDF began to enforce an **expanded n. Gaza no-go zone** up to 1.5 km deep. In response, most Palestinian factions said they would allow the 2/05 Sharm al-Shaykh truce to expire on 12/31, but Hamas said it would observe the truce until the 1/25/06 legislative elections, in which it was participating, and then reassess its position.

Operation Blue Skies continued through 1/25/06, despite an escalation in cross-border fire into Israel by IJ, the AMB, the Abu Rish Brigades, and the PRCs (wounding 1 IDF soldier inside Israel but otherwise causing no damage or injuries). Palestinian violence overall remained low, and the factions largely continued to observe the cease-fire beyond its expiration on 12/31/05. Yet the open-ended IDF operations that began in December 2005 set a new pattern for Israel's post-disengagement relationship with Gaza. From then on, Gaza would be the target of near-continuous and steadily escalating IDF operations—many undeclared—that would culminate three years later in Operation Cast Lead.

Meanwhile, Ariel Sharon, briefly hospitalized on 12/20 for a mild stroke, was incapacitated on 1/4 by a major stroke. Kadima partner Ehud Olmert was named acting PM as Israel moved toward the 3/06 general elections.

25 January 2006: Hamas Wins Control of the Palestinian Council

Hamas won a stunning victory in the 1/25 Palestinian legislative elections, taking 72 of 132 seats to Fatah's 45. Immediately after, Israel launched an international campaign, urging foreign governments to suspend contacts with the PA if Hamas were allowed a significant role in the government. On 1/29, it suspended contacts with Abbas and the PA until all Palestinian militant groups were disarmed and Hamas had met three demands: (1) recognition of Israel, (2)

renunciation of violence, and (3) adherence to previous agreements. These demands were endorsed by the Quartet on 1/30 as the **conditions required of Hamas** before the international community would open direct contact with the Hamas-led PA. The EU and the U.S. threatened to halt aid the minute a Hamas-led government was sworn in. Fatah vowed that it would not participate in a coalition with Hamas. With U.S. encouragement, Abbas began concentrating power in the office of the PA pres., diluting the authority of the PA cabinet and legislature.

February 2006: The Siege of Gaza Begins

As Hamas began work to form a coalition government, senior officials from Israel, the U.S., and Abbas's PA held (2/7–8) trilateral talks in Texas to explore ways of sidelining Hamas. Senior Israeli and U.S. officials held parallel closed-door meetings on the same subject in Washington, attended by select members of Congress. Privately, Israeli and Western diplomats acknowledged (*New York Times* 2/14) that the aim was to find "ways to destabilize the Palestinian government so that the newly elected Hamas officials will fail" and Abbas would be able to dissolve the Palestinian Council (PC) and call new elections, which, following the unhappy experience of a Hamas victory, would be won by "a reformed and chastened Fatah movement."

Before the newly elected PC was sworn in on 2/18, the U.S. and Israel had reportedly formulated a **12-point plan to pressure Hamas** either to moderate its stands or refrain from taking a leadership role in the PA. The measures—calculated to isolate the Gaza Strip and deprive the PA of funding—included withholding Israeli transfers of value-added tax revenue Israel collects on the PA's behalf; tightening restrictions at Gaza crossing points (including preventing entry of all but humanitarian aid and basic goods); ending the customs envelope allowing goods leaving Gaza and the West Bank to enter Israel without customs fees; barring Gazan workers from entering Israel; preventing Palestinian movement between the West Bank and Gaza except in extreme emergencies; and preventing construction of the Gaza sea port. Meanwhile, the U.S. began pressuring the international community to halt Palestinian aid. Soon, however, in coordination with the EU (which was reluctant to suspend aid altogether), it agreed

to search for ways to continue funding that would bypass Hamas-controlled PA bodies, such as making direct payments to Abbas "and his structures," international organizations, or NGOs.

When Abbas swore in the new PC and formally authorized Hamas's designated PM, Ismail Haniyeh, to form a cabinet on 2/18, he warned that he would dissolve the new government and call new elections if Hamas did not adopt a government platform upholding past peace agreements; recognizing the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; and calling for immediate resumption of negotiations with Israel, a halt to violence, and continued government reforms. Hamas pledged to seek the consensus of all Palestinian factions in drawing up a broadly acceptable platform. Fatah agreed to take part in these talks but not to join a national unity government.

While Palestinian rocket fire from Gaza remained low overall during February, an IJ rocket fired from Gaza on 2/3 (3 Israelis injured) prompted Israel formally to resume (2/3) **Operation Blue Skies**, keeping Gaza borders closed for long periods, barring Palestinian agricultural exports during the peak harvest, and escalating assassinations (10 AMB and IJ members killed by 2/15).

March 2006: Abbas Endorses a Hamas-led Cabinet

On 3/25 Abbas endorsed Haniyeh's cabinet, comprising 18 Hamas members and 6 independent technocrats. He also approved Haniyeh's government program, though it did not explicitly re-endorse previous peace agreements or recognize the PLO as the Palestinians' sole legitimate representative. The new government was sworn in on 3/29, with Haniyeh stressing that he would allow Abbas to pursue peace efforts with Israel. Newly installed Interior M Said Siyam pledged to encourage other factions to join Hamas's cease-fire through 2006.

As of 3/29, the U.S. began to pressure Abbas to let Haniyeh's government operate for 90 days, then declare it "ineffective," dissolve it, and call new elections. Meanwhile, the U.S., which had publicly stated on 3/13 that it would effectively consider any party that joined a Hamas-led government to be a "terrorist organization," ordered its diplomats and contractors to halt all contact with any PA official under the authority of the prime minister or any other minister in the Hamas-led government. Even U.S. en-

voy Maj. Gen. Keith Dayton, who took over Ward's mission overseeing outstanding security issues related to disengagement in 11/05, could no longer meet with PA security officials. The U.S. and EU suspended all aid, saying they would begin transferring money directly to Abbas once he secured West Bank and Gaza borders and asserted security control.

Israeli elections were held on 3/28. Olmert's Kadima party won the largest block of seats (29 of 120 seats, compare to 19 for Labor, 12 each for Likud and Shas, 11 for Yisrael Beitanu), authorizing him to form a government.

Meanwhile, the UN warned (3/1) of shortages of basic goods in Gaza so severe that even UNRWA and the World Food Program had difficulty getting enough food to Gaza's poor.

April 2006: Israel Declares the Hamas-Led PA a "Hostile Entity"

Pressures on the Hamas-led PA mounted during April. On 4/9, Israel declared it a "**hostile entity**," formally severing all direct contacts with it and even with foreign officials who had dealt with it. At the same time, the U.S. warned (early 4/06) U.S. banks that they could face sanctions or seizure of assets for "abetting terrorism" if they continued to handle PA transactions and urged other countries to follow suit. Israel's 2 largest banks cut ties with all institutions dealing with PA accounts.

With the Hamas-led PA government formed, Abbas stepped up efforts to foster the creation of parallel structures that he alone would control to bypass the legal government: He began setting up parallel PA security commands to effectively remove security control from Hamas-affiliated Interior M Siyam and place it under his control as president. He also insisted that foreign relations be placed under his purview as PLO head, having ambassadors report directly to him and requiring newly appointed Hamas FM Mahmud Zahar to clear all actions through Abbas's office.

With Fatah cadres (who made up the vast majority of the PA security forces) refusing to work under Hamas, Interior M Siyam appointed respected Fatah-affiliated PRC head Jamal Abu Samhadana as his inspector general to create a new volunteer security force (the Executive Support Force; ESF) to assume policing, starting in Gaza. Gaza-based PA Preventive Security forces loyal to

Fatah's Dahlan seized weapons from the PA's Gaza armory to keep them out of the ESF's hands. To counterbalance the ESF, the U.S. and EU drafted plans to fund the expansion of Abbas's presidential guard from 2,600 to 3,500 officers, with training to be overseen by U.S. security envoy Dayton as part of ongoing PA security reform efforts.

On 4/5, Haniyeh announced that because of international aid restrictions, the impossibility of securing bank loans, and Israel's refusal to transfer value-added taxes, the PA had run out of money and could not meet payroll, pledging that he and his ministers would freeze their salaries until those of all civil servants were paid up. Fatah declared that it would no longer use its networks to help raise funding for the PA since financing PA operations was now Hamas's responsibility.

On 4/30, Quartet envoy Wolfensohn resigned, stating that Israeli and international restrictions on the Hamas-led PA made it impossible to fulfill his mandate to generate Palestinian economic development and indeed threatened peace and stability as a whole. The World Bank, among others, warned of potentially irreversible setbacks to the Palestinian economy and society if restrictions continued.

Meanwhile, the IDF had launched (4/4) yet another full-scale open-ended operation following escalating Palestinian rocket fire into Israel from Gaza (no injuries) in retaliation for the IDF's assassination of the AMB's West Bank commander, itself in retaliation for a 3/30 suicide attack in the West Bank that killed 4 settlers. **Operation Southern Arrow**, essentially an intensification of Operation Blue Skies, continued almost to the end of May 2006. In a precedent-setting operation on 5/29, the IDF sent ground forces into n. Gaza for the 1st time since disengagement.

Inside Gaza, Fatah factions stepped up demonstrations (sometimes leading to clashes) denouncing the Hamas-led government's failure to provide salaries and services. Some Fatah cadres set up checkpoints along Gaza roads in an attempt to assert their authority.

May 2006: The IDF Resumes Ground Incursions into Gaza

Olmert's coalition cabinet was sworn in on 5/4. Abbas urged Olmert to resume peace talks immediately, stressing that negotiations would be under the purview of the PLO. Olmert responded (5/21) that he

would meet Abbas only if he took serious steps to disarm militant groups and to force Hamas to agree to the 1/30/06 Quartet demands. Meanwhile the Quartet, with U.S. approval, agreed to set up a "Temporary International Mechanism" (TIM)—expected to begin functioning by 7/06—to direct international aid to the Palestinians while bypassing the Hamas-led PA.

On the ground, Fatah-affiliated AMB factions made repeated shows of force to challenge Hamas, sparking 4 days (5/8–11) of clashes across the Strip, with each side setting up checkpoints and roadblocks to control local areas. In total, 2 AMB members and 1 Hamas member were killed, and 21 Palestinians (mostly bystanders) were wounded. Fatah and Hamas held several days of talks to reduce tensions, agreeing (5/13) to remove all barriers and end the public display of weapons.

But a few days later, when PA Interior M Siyam deployed (5/17) the first 3,000 ESF officers (mostly Hamas cadres, but also some 500 PRC members) in Gaza, Abbas ordered 1,000s of Fatah-affiliated PA police officers (believed to be led by forces loyal to Dahlan) to take to the streets in Gaza, sparking serious clashes, tit-for-tat kidnappings, and bombings across the Strip. By the time a new Fatah-Hamas cease-fire was negotiated on 5/25, 4 Fatah members, 3 Hamas members, and a Jordanian embassy employee were dead and at least two dozen people were injured. To counterbalance the ESF, Israel allowed Jordan and Egypt to transfer 3,000 M-16 rifles and 3 m. rounds of ammunition to Abbas's expanded presidential guard, overseen by U.S. security envoy Dayton.

June 2006: Escalating Attacks on Gaza, Arresting Hamas-Affiliated PC Members

Israel stepped up attacks on Gaza early in the month, assassinating (6/8) **newly appointed ESF commander Abu Samhadana** in Rafah and shelling (6/9) the coast near Bayt Lahiya, killing at least 8 Palestinian civilians and wounding 32. Hamas suspended (6/9) the cease-fire it had observed since 1/05 and, with IJ, began firing rockets (about 10/day) into Israel, wounding 4 Israelis before reimposing its unilateral cease-fire on 6/15. Although Israel acknowledged that Hamas was largely sticking to a cease-fire, it announced (6/19) a new policy of attacking Hamas targets for each Palestinian rocket strike regardless of which group was responsible. At the same time,

Israel sharply increased air strikes on Gaza militants and began (6/23) sending ground forces into Gaza to conduct arrest sweeps, with the detainees remanded to Israel.

Responding to Israel's escalation, Hamas, the PRCs, and the previously unknown Army of Islam (AOI) staged (6/25) a joint attack on Gaza's Kerem Shalom crossing, killing 2 IDF soldiers, wounding 4, and capturing **IDF Cpl. Gilad Shalit**. Israel sealed Gaza's borders and sent 2-3 armored battalions and 2 infantry brigades (about 5,000 troops) into s. Gaza to search for Shalit, and in the night of 6/27-28 launched **Operation Summer Rains**, involving heavy aerial and artillery assaults on Gaza infrastructure, including the seizure of the Dahaniyya airport site and the destruction of bridges linking southern and central Gaza.

Shortly before the launch of the operation, Olmert laid out (6/22) 3 "nonnegotiable conditions" for resuming substantive talks with the PA: "total disarmament of terrorist organizations and total cessation of violence, full implementation of agreements, and recognition of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state." On 6/28, he authorized massive arrest raids targeting Hamas officials across the West Bank, detaining 64 senior Hamas political figures, including 8 PA cabinet ministers and 26 Hamas-affiliated PC members. Also seized were 23 senior IQB members. (The arrests had reportedly been planned since 1/06, and the arrests warrants had been ordered weeks earlier.)

Meanwhile, Hamas-Fatah tensions in Gaza were again escalating, with exchanges of gunfire, kidnappings, and other shows of force, including car bombings targeting a senior Hamas military commander and a PA Preventive Security Force (PSF) officer. Some 7 Palestinians were killed and 24 wounded (mostly militants) in the exchanges.

July 2006: Near-Daily IDF Ground Operations across Gaza

On 7/1, with no progress in learning of Shalit's whereabouts, Israel escalated ground attacks on Gaza and refocused **Operation Summer Rains** on punishing and destabilizing the Hamas-led government in Gaza, further cutting fuel, electricity, water delivery, and sewage treatment to Gaza and intensifying strikes on PA ministries and government and security offices there. Although the armored battalions and infantry brigades were withdrawn on 7/12, the operation was

not over; it continued through 10/06. The IDF began routinely launching daylong (occasionally longer) ground offensives into Gaza, some of them named "suboperations" authorized by the cabinet (i.e., **Operation Samson's Pillars** on 7/26-28). By the end of the month, nearly 175 Palestinians had been killed and 100s wounded in near-daily incursions in n., central, and s. Gaza; according to the UN, Israel conducted 221 air strikes on Gaza during the month.

With Israeli import and export restrictions ongoing, Gaza's poverty rate had risen to 79%. The cost of basic goods increased by 10%. Palestinians in urban areas were receiving 6-8 hrs./day of electricity and 2-3 hrs./day of water. The UN estimated overall damages to Palestinian infrastructure since 6/28 at \$15.5 m.

August 2006: Hamas and Fatah Open Unity Talks to Break the Gaza Siege

By 8/15, **Operation Summer Rains** had left at least 213 Palestinians dead (mostly civilians) and 650 wounded. The UN reported that the IDF was firing an average of 200-250 artillery shells/day into Gaza (compared to an average of 9 Palestinian rockets/day fired into Israel). Throughout the month, IDF incursions into Gaza continued, including another major "sub-operation" on Gaza City named **Operation Locked Kindergarten** (8/27-31). Meanwhile, with the siege on Gaza entering its 6th month, international agencies warned that the economy was devolving to a barter system for lack of personal income; municipal services (e.g., garbage collection and water treatment) were failing; and concerns of a widespread health crisis were on the rise.

Even as Hamas and Fatah reopened talks via Egypt on forming a national unity government (in the hope that movement toward meeting the 1/30/06 Quartet demands would lead to lifting the siege and a resumption of international aid to the PA), Fatah cadres in Gaza, at Abbas's urging, began to stage large demonstrations and strikes and attempted to assert security control over areas of Gaza to challenge Hamas authority, leading to localized skirmishes with the Hamas-led ESF.

September-October 2006: A New U.S. Initiative to Promote Abbas

Hamas-Fatah talks on a national unity government were ongoing but stalled on

2 points: (1) division of portfolios and (2) U.S. insistence that unless the government platform included explicit recognition of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, international aid would not be resumed. (Hamas professed willingness to recognize Israel as a *fait accompli* and to respect previously signed agreements calling for a 2-state solution and full normalization with Israel, but said it could not acknowledge Israel's right to exist without a parallel recognition of Palestinian rights.)

Meanwhile, the U.S., concerned about the impact of intensive Israeli-Palestinian violence on its policy efforts elsewhere in the region (e.g., Iraq, Iran), launched a new peace initiative premised on its "moderates vs. extremists" vision of the region, with the "moderate" Abbas as the only acceptable peace partner with Israel and the "extremist" Hamas to be undermined. Key to the plan was strengthening the Abbas-controlled PA and Fatah security forces (inter alia, via doubling Abbas's presidential guard from the 3,000 officers achieved under Dayton's tutelage to 6,000) to assure their ability to overpower forces aligned with Hamas. The plan also provided for grooming Dahlan both to take on Hamas and as a political alternative to Abbas should the latter prove unequal to the task. At the same time, the U.S. allocated \$42 m. to supporting Hamas political opponents on the assumption that Abbas would soon dissolve the Hamas-led government and call early elections.

As part of the initiative, Secy. Rice toured the region urging moderate Arab states to cut ties to Hamas and direct increased funding to Abbas to bolster his popularity. Judging that economic revitalization would serve the same end, the U.S. pressed Israel to ease restrictions on the flow of goods into and out of Gaza. As of mid-9/06, Israel allowed fuel imports through Nahal Oz crossing to return to normal levels, reopened the Qarni crossing to limited imports and very restricted exports, and allowed more humanitarian goods and some construction materials (for repairing Gaza's power plant) through the Kerem Shalom and Sufa crossings. Erez and Rafah, the primary crossings for individual travel, remained almost completely closed.

Meanwhile, **Operation Summer Rains** continued at a lower intensity (ground incursions, only 40 air strikes/week, shelling, destruction of water and electricity networks, etc.), leaving at least another 15 Palestinians dead. Palestinian rocket fire into Israel remained low (about 1/day), though it

increased to 6–7/day after a failed IDF assassination attempt (10/12) on a senior Hamas commander. (Hamas resumed rocket fire for the first time in a month.)

More deadly were Fatah-Hamas clashes in the wake of escalating Fatah challenges to Hamas control: Some 30 Palestinians died in the intra-Palestinian fighting, which for the first time took on the characteristics of civil war.

November 2006: A New 6-Month Cease-Fire Begins

In response to increased rocket fire from Gaza in late 10/06, Israel launched (11/1) **Operation Autumn Clouds**, superseding Operation Summer Rains. The operation against n. Gaza (Bayt Hanun, Bayt Lahiya, Jabaliya r.c., parts of Gaza City) was concentrated and intense (240 airstrikes in 8 days; ground clashes; destruction of land and buildings; 82 Palestinian dead). After Operation Autumn Clouds ended on 11/8, Israeli attacks on Gaza slowed to intermittent airstrikes, shelling, and assassinations, but on 11/21, following Palestinian rocket fire that killed 1 Israeli, the IDF launched a major **unnamed operation**—including a ground offensive, heavy clashes, and airstrikes—against n. Gaza. The operation ended after Abbas opened new cease-fire talks with Palestinian factions in Gaza and secured (11/25) a pledge from Hamas leader Khalid Mishal in Damascus that Hamas would observe a 6-month cease-fire if Israel reciprocated and took serious steps toward creation of a viable Palestinian state. Olmert accepted the deal on 11/25. The Palestinian factions in Gaza (except IJ) ceased fire early on 11/26, and the IDF withdrew completely and ceased fire on Gaza by that evening.

The following day (11/27), **Olmert stated in a major policy speech** that if the Palestinians maintained the 6-month cease-fire in Gaza, formed an acceptable national unity government (based on the 3 Israeli/Quartet requirements), and released Shalit, Israel would be willing to resume contacts with Abbas, release value-added taxes owed the PA, reduce restrictions on Palestinian movement and access, and consider further withdrawal from West Bank settlements. In a 11/30 visit to Israel, Secy. of State Rice told Abbas that only a Palestinian government that excluded Hamas would be acceptable and expressed frustration that the Hamas-led government had not yet been dissolved.

Meanwhile, Israel under U.S. pressure had allowed (ca. 11/1) Kerem Shalom, Qarni, and Sufa commercial crossings to resume more normal operating hours but maintained strict limits on imports and tightened security requirements and checks of truckers. On the first anniversary of Rice's Agreement on Movement and Access, the UN reported that Gaza access to either the West Bank or abroad was extremely limited and that commercial trade was "negligible."

December 2006: Arming Abbas against Hamas

Under pressure from Rice, Abbas suspended (12/16) the Hamas-Fatah national unity talks, which had been showing some progress toward forming a unity government, and declared plans to call early elections. Simultaneously, the U.S. announced (12/14) that it would reallocate aid originally earmarked for U.S. aid programs in the West Bank and Gaza (cancelled or suspended after Hamas won the 1/06 elections) to Dayton's project to expand Abbas's security forces to confront Hamas (see September-October 2006 above). The U.S. also began pressuring Abbas to appoint U.S. ally Dahlan as his national security adviser.

To bolster support for Abbas, Olmert agreed to meet him on 12/23 in Jerusalem, marking the first meeting between Israeli and Palestinian leaders since 2/05. Under U.S. pressure, Olmert also agreed to permit an Egyptian arms shipment (2,000 AK-47 rifles, 20,000 magazines, and 2 m. rounds of ammunition) to Abbas's security forces in Gaza, to consider steps to improve the flow of trade across Gaza's borders, and generally to keep lines of communication with Abbas open.

On the ground, the AMB and IJ continued firing rockets from Gaza into Israel in violation of the cease-fire at a rate of about 2/day, lightly injuring 1 Israeli. The IDF resumed (ca. 12/10) brief cross-border incursions to level land along the border to improve lines of sight, but otherwise maintained its cease-fire. After a Palestinian rocket seriously injured 2 Israeli teenagers, however, Olmert authorized (12/27) the IDF to resume "pinpoint attacks" on Palestinians firing from Gaza, though none were immediately staged.

Meanwhile, serious Hamas-Fatah clashes broke out in the Strip as of 12/10, following reciprocal assassination attempts, causing

PM Haniyeh to return hurriedly (12/14) from a trip to Sudan. Violence spiked when Israel attempted to block Haniyeh's return through the Rafah crossing, sparking armed clashes between Hamas and Abbas's presidential guard manning the Rafah terminal, leaving 15 Palestinians wounded. When Haniyeh was finally allowed through later in the day, suspected Fatah members (alleged by Hamas to be Dahlan allies) fired on his convoy, killing his bodyguard and wounding his son, an adviser, and 10 bystanders. Exchanges (involving automatic weapons, mortar, and RPG fire), kidnappings, and assassination attempts spread across Gaza and to Jenin and Ramallah, leaving 17 Palestinians dead and 130 wounded before Hamas and Fatah leaders reined in their forces and imposed a cease-fire on 12/23.

January 2007

On 1/5, the U.S. announced an \$86.4 m. aid package for Abbas that included \$76.4 m. for projects to "transform and strengthen" the PA PSF (branches of which were loyal to Dahlan) and Abbas's presidential guard, and \$10 m. for security improvements at Qarni crossing to improve the flow of trade. Members of the security forces covered by the grant would be vetted to make sure none had "extremist" ties. The White House formally authorized the \$86.4 m. on 1/30, but Congress put a nonbinding hold on the money ca. 2/15, seeking further assurances that no money would go to Hamas.

The Fatah-Hamas fighting of December resumed on 1/1, when a relatively minor incident in Jabaliya r.c. touched off violence that reached unprecedented levels, engulfing much of the Strip. A truce, imposed on 1/10, was broken on 1/23, apparently in belated response to a speech by Dahlan at a large Fatah rally in Gaza City (1/8) that incited the crowd to hit back "twice as hard" at those who attack Fatah. To "send Dahlan a message," 40 suspected Hamas members raided (1/23) a deserted beach resort controlled by Dahlan, blowing up a reception hall. Though there were no injuries, the attack precipitated new clashes that included besieging the homes of senior Fatah and Hamas officials, dozens of kidnappings on both sides, and Fatah's storming (1/26) of a Gaza City mosque (killing 5 worshipers and wounding 10). By 1/27, Gaza had almost completely shut down, with civilians hunkering down in their homes as the intra-Palestinian fighting raged, arguably beyond

the control of the leaderships. At least 22 Palestinians were killed and 73 wounded in the fighting (including the mosque victims), which finally ended when both sides accepted (1/28) an invitation from Saudi Arabia's King Abdallah to hold national unity talks in Mecca under his auspices on 2/6.

Meanwhile, as Palestinian rocket fire from Gaza (mostly by IJ) into Israel continued at a rate of roughly 2/day, Israel resumed (1/24) air strikes on Gaza targeting rocket launching sites, smuggling tunnels on the Rafah border, and the homes of senior Palestinian militants, though both sides generally considered the 11/06 cease-fire to be holding. Erez and Rafah crossings remained almost completely closed. Israel maintained tight restrictions on Palestinian imports and exports. Most Gazans were still receiving only 6-8 hrs./day of electricity and 2-3 hrs./day of running water due to damage inflicted at the start of Operation Summer Rains in 6/06.

February 2007: More Hamas-Fatah Fighting and the Mecca Accord

On 2/1, a group of Hamas and ESF members, acting on rumors of Fatah arms smuggling, halted a 4-truck convoy escorted by Abbas's presidential guard entering Gaza from Israel through the Kerem Shalom crossing and demanded to search it. Clashes ensued that left at least 4 presidential guards and 1 bystander dead and 34 wounded (including 14 bystanders). The shipment of supplies from the UAE was reportedly organized by Dahlan, with the knowledge of the U.S. and Israel, for guard units loyal to him. The widely held belief that the trucks were carrying arms and ammunition cannot be confirmed, because the contents were spirited away (it is unclear by whom) during the fighting.

Increasingly, the Hamas-Fatah fighting resembled full-scale military combat, with each side raiding and destroying (often with mortars and rocket-propelled grenade [RPGs]) the other's security offices and training bases, confiscating weapons, and attempting to secure control of territory. By 2/4, Hamas had the clear upper hand in most of n. Gaza and large areas of Gaza City, with Fatah able to defend only its major Gaza City compounds. Control of Gaza's central and southern areas was less clear, though Hamas was generally seen as dominant.

Even as heavy infighting in Gaza continued, Hamas and Fatah leaderships convened

national unity talks in Mecca. When an accord was announced on 2/8, a cease-fire in Gaza immediately took effect though tensions remained high. The final toll of the 1/23-2/8 fighting was at least 74 Palestinians dead and more than 360 wounded, many of them bystanders. The **Mecca Accord** itself (see Doc. B2 in *JPS* 143) called for the formation within 5 weeks of a Hamas-Fatah unity government and set out the number of cabinet portfolios for each side but did not resolve differences over key issues that had scuttled previous national unity efforts or affirm that the new government would explicitly recognize Israel's right to exist (as demanded by the U.S., Israel, and the Quartet). Neither the U.S. nor the EU rejected the plan outright (largely out of respect for Saudi Arabia), but both refused to guarantee that implementation of the accord would end the boycott of the PA and siege of Gaza.

March 2007: Forming a PA National Unity Government

On 3/17, a new unity government formed by Haniyeh in keeping with the Mecca Accord was approved by Abbas and the PC. Abbas urged the international community to lift the boycott and Israel to resume final status negotiations. In a gesture to the U.S., Abbas appointed Dahlan as his national security adviser.

Although Israel denounced Abbas for going back on repeated promises not to join a government with Hamas, it ultimately agreed to have limited contact with it for security coordination and humanitarian reasons, but not to resume peace talks or transfer value-added taxes owed to the PA until the 1/06 Quartet demands were met. The U.S. said it would have contact on an as-needed basis only with Abbas and select members of the government with no ties to Hamas. It also announced that it would cut the \$86.4 m. security aid package sent to Congress in 1/07 to \$59 m. out of concern that some money might benefit Hamas. Congress approved the new budget. The international financial boycott of the PA and heavy restrictions on Gaza remained.

Angered by Dahlan's appointment as security adviser, renegade Hamas members fired (3/19) guns and mortars from Gaza into Israel for the first time since the 11/26/06 cease-fire. Though Hamas and Israel both reaffirmed their intentions to abide by the cease-fire, the IDF stepped up cross-border fire into Gaza, wounding 10 Palestinians and

directing artillery fire on n. Gaza for the first time since 11/06, killing 1 Palestinian and wounding 6.

Hamas-Fatah fighting in Gaza, sporadic since 2/8, erupted again on 3/21 between hard-line Fatah and Hamas elements apparently unhappy over the formation of the unity government. Over the next week, reciprocal violence between Fatah members and Fatah-affiliated PA security and intelligence forces on one hand and ESF forces and IQB members on the other left 4 Palestinians dead and 42 wounded. The exchanges, mainly in n. Gaza City, included bombings, RPG fire, kidnappings, and outright executions on both sides. The fighting continued until 3/28.

As law and order and humanitarian conditions continued to break down in Gaza, clan-based groups gained influence. Among the more prominent was the Gaza City-based AOI, which had taken part (with Hamas and the PRCs) in the 2006 attack that captured IDF Cpl. Shalit. On 3/12, the AOI kidnapped **BBC Gaza correspondent Alan Johnston**, seeking \$5 m. and control of a parcel of prime PA-held land in Gaza in exchange for his release.

April 2007: U.S. Action Plans to Mold an "Acceptable" Palestinian Government

Abbas and Olmert began regular meetings on 4/15, which focused on Abbas's plans to rebuild the PA security forces and augment his presidential guard to counter Hamas and on ideas for halting rocket fire and smuggling across the Gaza border.

On 4/25, the U.S. presented Israel and Abbas aides with a document entitled "**Acceleration Benchmarks for Agreement on Movement and Access as Well as on the Gaza Security Situation**" (see Doc. D1 in *JPS* 144). Drafted primarily by Dayton, the document contained two elements aimed at helping Abbas and Fatah secure control despite the new unity government: (1) a detailed 5-8/07 timetable for Israel to remove roadblocks and open passages for Palestinian travel; and (2) more plans to upgrade security forces loyal to Abbas that specifically called on Israel to support Dayton's requests for arms, ammunition, and equipment for Abbas's forces in an "immediate and ongoing" manner. The PA was tasked with drafting a strategy to

halt rocket fire into Israel and cross-border smuggling into Gaza.

Simultaneously, a confidential draft of a U.S. plan drawn up in conjunction with the benchmarks document, the "**Action Plan for the Palestinian Presidency**," was leaked to the press, outlining economic, political, and security steps aimed at "building [Abbas's] political capital" to enable him to call new legislative elections in fall 2007 and defeat Hamas at the polls. It also called for internal reforms in Fatah, including election of a new Fatah Central Committee "that empowers the new guard," a move essentially to purge Fatah of elements critical of Abbas. (Indeed, elements within Fatah had begun openly to question whether Abbas and Dahlan were "working towards a situation where the movement's founding principles are ignored," with a group of Fatah commanders sending Abbas a letter in late 4/07 demanding that he resign as Fatah head.)

On 4/14, the PC endorsed a 100-day plan drafted by the PA's new Interior M, Hani al-Qawasmi (an independent nominated by Hamas and supported by Fatah) for restoring order to Gaza that involved both ESF and Abbas-controlled PA security units. The plan could not be implemented, however, because Fatah-affiliated PA forces refused to obey Qawasmi's orders to deploy, saying they would answer only to Abbas. Meanwhile, Abbas's new security adviser, Dahlan, completed the first stage of forming a new 1,400-member Fatah Special Force to act as an "intervention force" against Hamas in Gaza if clashes erupted again. Qawasmi resigned (4/23) in protest but was persuaded by Haniyeh to remain.

Meanwhile, Israeli DM Amir Peretz reauthorized (4/3) the IDF to resume "pinpoint operations against terrorists" in Gaza; Olmert had given similar authorization in 12/06 (few strikes had been launched since then), in principle making the new order unnecessary and raising concerns of an escalation. In fact, the IDF immediately stepped up cross-border fire (including a helicopter air strike) near the n. Gaza border fence, naval fire on Palestinian fishermen heading out to sea, bulldozing operations inside the Gaza border, and assassinations in the West Bank, killing 3 AMB and 3 IJ members, prompting those groups in Gaza to escalate their rocket fire into Israel to a rate of 20/week, causing no injuries. On 4/24, Israel's independence day and the anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba, Hamas members

fired several rockets into Israel, causing no damage or injuries. Hamas blamed renegade members, saying it was taking steps to reinforce the crumbling cease-fire. Israel agreed to hold off on retaliation until "the position of Hamas as a whole becomes clearer."

May 2007: Abbas Sidelines the Unity Government

On 5/10, Abbas announced deployment of 3,000 PA security forces in central and northern Gaza to "improve law and order" without coordinating with Interior M Qawasmi. The next day, Fatah security forces set up roadblocks, stopped cars for random security checks, and conducted high-profile armed patrols across Gaza, also without coordinating with the Interior Min. or the ESF. Clashes with Hamas members (but not the ESF, which Haniyeh ordered to their barracks as soon as fighting broke out) immediately ensued, killing at least 24 Palestinians and wounding 30. On 5/15, Dahlan ordered 500 Fatah reinforcements being trained in Egypt under the Dayton plan to return to Gaza to defend Abbas's forces. Israel immediately approved their passage through the Rafah crossing. Qawasmi resigned definitively, leaving Haniyeh in charge of the Interior Min.

The AMB and IJ maintained rocket fire from Gaza into Israel at the rate of 20/week during the first half of the month, lightly injuring 2 Israelis. While Hamas largely abstained from rocket fire, on 5/15, Hamas members, angry over the Fatah reinforcements from Egypt, fired more than 20 rockets into Israel, hitting a house and an empty school, and wounding 2 Israelis (1 seriously). In response, Olmert's security cabinet authorized (5/16) "severe and harsh" attacks on Gaza, effectively ending the 11/06 cease-fire. Between 5/16 and 5/19, the IDF carried out 21 air strikes targeting Hamas and the ESF (hitting the units in their barracks), killing 32 Palestinians, wounding more than 100, damaging numerous businesses (including alleged weapons factories and money exchanges) and homes, and seizing and leveling a strip of prime agricultural land between Bayt Hanun and Bayt Lahiya to expand its northern no-go zone. When Palestinian rocket fire increased to nearly 30/day (lightly injuring at least 4 Israelis and damaging 3 homes and 2 trucks), Israel's security cabinet approved (5/20) another

escalation: between 5/20 and 5/29, the IDF carried out 51 air strikes, killing another 22 Palestinians (5 assassinated), wounding nearly 100, and damaging 100 homes. Simultaneously, the IDF carried out arrest raids across the West Bank, detaining 33 senior Hamas officials and Hamas-affiliated politicians (including 2 PA cabinet members and 3 PC members). Israel halted air strikes on 5/29, when Abbas and Olmert, under U.S. pressure to begin discussing a "political horizon" for a final status agreement in hopes of calming the violence, agreed to meet on 6/7.

Israel's sharp escalation against Hamas, coinciding with Abbas's show of force in Gaza, reinforced growing perceptions that Israel, the U.S., and Abbas were working together to carry out a military putsch against Hamas. This perception, in turn, made it difficult for Haniyeh and Abbas to contain the interfactional violence in Gaza, which escalated sharply on 5/16, leaving 20 Palestinians dead and dozens wounded that day. Between 5/16 and 5/19, fighters on both sides ignored at least 4 cease-fire calls issued jointly by Abbas and Haniyeh (supported by Damascus-based Mishal), bearing out concerns that the political leaderships no longer had full control over their military wings. Finally, on 5/20, after extensive mediation by Egypt, a truce stuck, ending a week of heavy fighting that had left at least 55 Palestinians dead.

Early to Mid-June 2007: The Hamas Takeover of Gaza

On 6/6, Abbas cancelled his planned meeting with Olmert set for 6/7 when it became clear in preparatory talks that Olmert rejected any confidence-building gestures (such as transferring value-added taxes owed the PA). Israel immediately resumed air strikes on Gaza.

Meanwhile, in early 6/07, rumors circulated that Abbas had pressed Dayton and Olmert to allow major arms shipments to Fatah (including RPGs, antitank missiles, and armored vehicles) on the grounds that Fatah and the PA were still seriously outgunned by Hamas. As a result of this lobbying, some \$40 m. of U.S. aid to the Fatah security forces was reportedly en route by 6/07. The same reports speculated that the arms might go to Gaza's new elite Fatah Security Force controlled by Dahlan.

Against the background of the 5/07 Hamas-Fatah fighting, such rumors set off alarm bells within the IQB, suggesting that

a massive 2-front assault by Fatah and the IDF to eradicate the Hamas movement was imminent. In this environment, unprovoked Fatah gunfire on an ESF patrol in Rafah on 6/7 rapidly escalated into serious inter-factional fighting in Gaza City. Despite appeals for calm by Abbas and Haniyeh (6/8), kidnappings and localized incidents (e.g., Gaza City, Rafah) of heavy fire (including RPGs and mortars) continued, leaving at least 3 Palestinian dead and 68 wounded by 6/9.

On 6/10, the IQB, reportedly disregarding appeals for restraint from Hamas's political leadership, decided to shut down Fatah in Gaza before the military balance could be changed by U.S. and Israeli aid. While Gazans hunkered down in their homes, Fatah-Hamas clashes (machine gun and RPG fire, sniping, roadblocks, kidnappings) intensified and spread across the Strip. Late in the evening on 6/10, Fatah and Hamas officials ordered their fighters off the streets to observe a cease-fire but were ignored. Thereafter, the Hamas political leadership essentially allowed the IQB to take control of the situation. Meanwhile, Israel sealed (6/10) Gaza's borders, prohibiting all entry and exit of individuals and goods, including humanitarian aid.

On 6/11, the IQB launched a series of major coordinated attacks on Fatah installations across Gaza. By evening on 6/12, Hamas gunmen and the ESF controlled most of n. Gaza. On 6/13, Hamas rapidly expanded its control southward, leaving only Rafah and primary PA installations in Gaza City contested by nightfall, while Fatah forces (ignoring Abbas's orders) began abandoning, destroying, and surrendering their posts. Midday on 6/14, with all but Gaza City's presidential compound under Hamas control and 100s of Fatah officials fleeing by boat for Egypt, Abbas declared a state of emergency, fired Haniyeh as PM, and dissolved the national unity government. Near midnight, Hamas seized Abbas's Gaza City compound, the only remaining Gaza institution still in Fatah's hands. Violence quickly tapered off, and the IQB ceded to Hamas's political leadership, which immediately declared (6/15) amnesty for Fatah leaders (except Dahlan) and released most Fatah security members in its custody in a bid to prevent a resurgence of violence. Up to 146 Palestinians were killed and 640 injured during the 5-day offensive.

On 6/16, Haniyeh declared that Hamas would not seek to set up a parallel government in Gaza but would assume day-to-day

government functions until Fatah and Hamas could hold reconciliation talks. All members of the PA security services in Gaza were ordered (6/15) to report for duty as usual to provide law and order (under Hamas commanders) or surrender their weapons; PA security forces loyal to Fatah did not comply. Israel temporarily opened the Erez crossing to allow Fatah officials to escape to Ramallah but otherwise kept crossings sealed.

Mid- to Late June 2007: The "West Bank First" Strategy

With Gaza under Hamas control, Abbas immediately took steps to consolidate his authority in the West Bank. With international support, he charged (6/16) Finance M Salam Fayyad, an independent technocrat, to form a new government and swore in (6/17) a 1-month emergency cabinet comprising independents and Fatah loyalists. He issued presidential decrees aimed at sidelining the elected PC with its Hamas majority, removing legislative and judicial oversight of the executive, and consolidating his security control. He also rejected Arab League and Yemeni offers to mediate a rapprochement with Hamas.

The Quartet immediately (6/15) pledged full support for Abbas, endorsing his dissolution of Haniyeh's government and appointment of Fayyad, while the EU declared (6/15) Abbas the "legitimate president of all Palestinians," suspended all humanitarian aid projects in Gaza, and lifted its boycott on the PA. The U.S. followed suit, lifting with congressional approval its PA boycott on 6/20 while vowing to maintain strong sanctions on Hamas. Egypt denounced Hamas's "coup against legitimacy" and withdrew its security delegation from Gaza.

Olmert welcomed (6/16, 6/17) the new situation as "an opportunity" for "dramatic change" and immediately began lobbying the U.S. to treat the West Bank and Gaza as separate entities to enable Israel to go after Hamas in Gaza. The U.S. said that it could support breaking the formal linkage set out in the 1993 Oslo Accord only if Israel made major concessions to Abbas in the West Bank, "with the goal of undermining Hamas in the eyes of Palestinians by improving life in the West Bank."

Bush and Olmert met in Washington on 6/19 to focus on ways the U.S. and Israel could bolster Abbas in the West Bank. At the close of the session, they announced a joint Israeli-U.S. strategy called "West Bank

First” involving financial support for Abbas, loosened Israeli travel restrictions in the West Bank, “moral support,” and efforts toward resuming peace talks. Back in Israel, Olmert stated publicly that serious efforts by Abbas to “fight terror” would be “a prerequisite” for any major Israeli steps. Olmert also agreed to a U.S. request to resume limited UN humanitarian aid imports to Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing. (In fact, openings remained spotty.) A “summit” between Mubarak, Jordan’s King Abdallah, Olmert, and Abbas was convened (6/24) in Sharm al-Shaykh to demonstrate support for Abbas. Upon Olmert’s return, Israel resumed major ground offensives into Gaza City and Khan Yunis on 6/27 (13 Palestinians killed, 40 wounded) and assassinations (6 senior IJ members and 1 AMB member).

Meanwhile, Hamas rocket and mortar fire from Gaza ceased almost completely as of 6/15 as Hamas imposed an undeclared ceasefire to encourage the opening of Gaza’s borders. IJ and the PRCs, however, resumed heavy rocket fire on 6/19 in response to a West Bank IDF attack that left 1 each of their members dead.

July 2007: Bush Calls for a Peace Conference

Humanitarian conditions in Gaza were rapidly deteriorating, especially given Israel’s tight restrictions on imports to and ban on exports from Gaza since 6/19. The UN reported that at least 80% of Gaza’s factories had closed or were functioning below 20% capacity because of inability to import raw materials, forcing layoffs of 10,000s of Palestinian workers. Basic goods, stocks of food aid held by the UN, and medical supplies in Gaza hospitals were running low, tapping emergency reserves. Electricity shortages increased because parts to repair Gaza’s power plant could not be imported. The UN estimated (7/31) the total cumulative and direct losses since the Gaza closure began on 6/10 to be \$23 m., increasing at a rate of \$500,000/day.

To relieve the economic and humanitarian situation, Haniyeh offered to turn control of Gaza’s crossings over to Abbas’s presidential guard or any international entity acceptable to Israel, but Abbas and Israel refused. Haniyeh then took steps to assert Hamas’s authority over Gaza, replacing some Fatah-affiliated mayors who had stopped working since Hamas’s takeover and deploying ESF patrols to improve law and order. Hamas also pressured the AOI to free **BBC corre-**

spondent Johnston, detained in 3/07; he was released on 7/4.

On 7/11, the U.S. privately informed Abbas and Olmert of Bush’s intention to call for a peace conference in fall 2007 to jumpstart the peace process and asked each side to take steps that Bush could cite as progress when proposing the summit. The U.S. requirement of the PA was that a semipermanent Palestinian government be in place as interlocutor. To meet the demand, Abbas on 7/13 dissolved Fayyad’s emergency government (possibly in violation of the Palestinian Basic Law, or constitution), and, after declaring that the PC was unable to form a quorum given that 45 Hamas-affiliated PC members were in Israeli jails, reappointed a “caretaker government” with 4 additional ministers. This government would rule until early elections could be called or a PC quorum achieved. For its part, Israel scaled back military operations in Gaza and declared a 5-day pause in West Bank operations.

On 7/16, **Bush gave a major policy speech** outlining the “West Bank First” plan, pledging substantial aid to Abbas’s PA, recommending a donors’ conference as soon as possible to raise funds to aid Abbas, and calling for an international conference in the fall to discuss reviving final status talks. To ensure success, Abbas was urged to arrest terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure, stop all Palestinian attacks on Israel, and free Cpl. Shalit. Israel was asked to transfer the value-added taxes owed the PA, halt new settlement construction, and dismantle unauthorized settlement outposts. Abbas welcomed Bush’s initiative, stating that a summit should result in a clear final status plan with an implementation timetable and international guarantees that deadlines would be met. Olmert proposed that Israel and the PA express an “agreement in principle” to establish a Palestinian state in Gaza and “most of the West Bank” as an interim step toward renewing final status talks.

Immediately after Bush’s speech, Israel resumed military operations in the Gaza Strip, conducting major ground incursions into Bayt Hanun (7/22), Bayt Lahiyah (7/22), and Khan Yunis (7/25–26). (Earlier in the month, from 7/4–7/12/07, Israel had staged large-scale raids into Bayt Hanun, al-Maghazir c., and al-Bureij r.c., sparking clashes with local Palestinians that left at least 11 Palestinians dead and 35 wounded.) Meanwhile, in mid-7/07, Fatah members and supporters in Gaza began to organize opposition to Hamas

and started intentionally provoking the ESF, resulting in some exchanges of fire.

August 2007

Abbas and Olmert began (8/6) regular talks to narrow their differences before a summit, but no progress was reported, in part because of their differing aims (a comprehensive agreement for the PA, a statement of principles for Israel).

Israel meanwhile was conducting near-daily incursions, air strikes, and cross-border attacks on Gaza (especially on Khan Yunis, 8/14 and 8/23), killing at least 43 Gazans in 8/07. Armed Fatah cells reportedly began reentering Gaza with Israeli help to destabilize the Hamas regime. Fatah cadres in Gaza began organizing strikes and boycotts of Friday prayers in mosques and promoting public vigils to challenge Hamas's authority. Palestinian rocket fire into Israel (mostly by IJ) continued at a rate of about 3/day, lightly injuring around 4 Israelis. The AMB and PRCs staged (8/25) a joint attack on the IDF post at the Erez crossing, lightly wounding 2 soldiers.

By the end of the month, only 10% of Gaza industries remained partially functioning; 95% of construction projects had been halted for lack of raw materials. Israel cut off fuel imports to Gaza completely on 8/15 but 4 days later allowed in quantities sufficient to run hospitals.

Abbas rejected (8/16) an appeal by Hamas to open reconciliation talks, followed through on 7/07 pledges to amend the election law to make it more difficult for Hamas to win the presidency or retain its majority in the PC (see Quarterly Update in *JPS* 146 for details), and issued presidential decrees effectively firing Hamas-affiliated civil servants.

September 2007: Israel Declares Gaza a "Hostile Territory"

As talks with Abbas stalled, Olmert's security cabinet **declared (9/19) Gaza a "hostile territory"** controlled by a "terrorist organization," announced further reductions on exports and travel permits for individuals (already restricted to VIPs and medical cases), and threatened further cuts to electricity and fuel services. Imports dropped by 50% (to around 50 truckloads/day); medical cases allowed to leave Gaza nearly ceased. Cumulative private sector losses in Gaza after 3 months of near-total closure reached \$52 m. The UN reported that new Israeli security procedures for imports to Gaza in-

creased monthly costs of its World Food Program alone by \$65,000. Israel also banned the import of paper to the Strip, saying it could be used for Hamas's "propaganda endeavors."

On the ground, Israel continued near-daily cross-border attacks and incursions into Gaza, killing at least 26 Palestinians (at least 5 assassinated), arresting scores of Gazans, demolishing at least 15 homes, and bulldozing wide swaths of land. Incursions included major raids on Rafah (9/7), al-Fakhari in s. Gaza (9/15-16), al-Shuka (9/18-21), Khan Yunis (9/24), and Bayt Hanun (9/26-27).

Palestinian rocket fire continued at a low level of around 3/day, typically causing no damage or injuries (though 1 rocket strike on 9/11 by IJ and the PRCs hit the IDF's Zikim base near the Gaza border, wounding 10 soldiers). Few if any rockets were fired by Hamas, which had observed a unilateral cease-fire since assuming control of Gaza in 6/07. IJ made (9/6) a failed attempt to break through the Gaza border fence to attack an IDF base, causing no injuries. Haniyeh held talks with IJ leaders in Gaza, and Mishal held parallel talks with leaders in Damascus, urging them to hold their fire in order to encourage Israel to lift the siege. No agreements were reached. ESF officers increasingly tried to clamp down on IJ activity, sparking some small clashes.

Fatah-Hamas violence in Gaza continued at a moderate pace, including exchanges of gunfire and bombings on both sides. Fatah continued to organize strikes, work slow-downs, and public demonstrations to challenge the Hamas government, often resulting in clashes, leaving 10s of Palestinians injured and 10s of Fatah supporters under arrests.

Despite Haniyeh's efforts to restore calm, Abbas rejected (9/11) an appeal by Saudi Arabia to open reconciliation talks with Hamas and reportedly suspended all third-party contacts aimed at securing a rapprochement with the acting Hamas government in Gaza.

Meanwhile, Israel had informed the U.S. that it would not discuss final status issues at the Annapolis summit (set for 11/07) and that anything beyond minor easing of restrictions on Palestinian movement in the West Bank would only harm Israeli security. Abbas protested, but the U.S. urged the PA and Israel to work out their differences themselves. While the U.S. stated that the 11/07 summit would go ahead as planned,

it downplayed expectations for the outcome, stating that it hoped the sides would achieve a framework "that would lead to full negotiations on the permanent status."

October 2007

As Israeli and Palestinian teams began drafting (10/3) a joint statement for the 11/07 Annapolis summit, Olmert assured (10/7) his cabinet that Israel would make no move toward a Palestinian state until the Palestinians had fulfilled all road map obligations (i.e., ceased all violence). The U.S. endorsed (10/19) Olmert's call for the road map as the basis of the summit but said that both sides must take steps to fulfill outstanding road map obligations before the summit was convened, with Israel halting settlement expansion and the PA working "harder to combat terror and extremism."

Israel continued near-daily cross-border attacks on Gaza, including major raids on Bayt Hanun (10/9 and 10/11) and Abasan in s. Gaza (10/17). During the month, Israeli assassinations alternated with Palestinian (predominantly IJ and PRC) rocket fire, followed by Israeli electricity cuts to parts of Gaza from which rockets were fired (with Israel stating that electricity cuts would henceforth be standard punishment for rocket strikes). The IDF also closed the Sufa crossing, cut fuel shipments to Gaza by 40–50%, and reduced imports to "the minimum amount of food and medicines necessary to avoid a humanitarian crisis." IDF cross-border attacks on Gaza between 10/23 and 10/31 killed at least 20 Palestinians and wounded 51.

Fatah-Hamas violence in Gaza continued at a moderate rate. Stepped-up ESF efforts to rein in IJ rocket fire triggered a major clash in Rafah on 10/21, with RPG fire exchanged and the PRC intervening to broker a truce; at least 2 Palestinians were killed and 35 wounded.

November 2007: The Annapolis Summit

As the Annapolis summit approached, Israel and the PA abandoned efforts to reach agreement on parameters for final status talks and said (11/3) that they would issue a joint statement reiterating intentions to implement the road map as the first step toward reviving final status negotiations. Meanwhile Israel, under U.S. pressure to reduce violence and make confidence-building gestures to Abbas before the summit, scaled

back military operations in Gaza, allowed Gazans to export strawberries and flowers at peak season, and permitted a 1-time shipment of lamb to enter the Strip. At the same time, however, the Knesset authorized Israel to garnishee value-added taxes owed the PA to pay compensation to Israelis harmed by Palestinian rocket fire, and Israel's mayor of Jerusalem announced \$51 m. of new projects to Judaize East Jerusalem.

The Annapolis summit was held as planned on 11/26–27. The final statement was vague (see Special Doc. A in *JPS* 147), pledging to resume "continuous" closed-door final status negotiations immediately with the aim of reaching a final agreement by the end of 2008. The document also stated that "implementation of the future peace treaty will be subject to implementation of the road map," allowing Olmert to stress that Israel would take no steps to implement a peace deal until Palestinian violence ceased completely and Palestinian institutions capable of guaranteeing Israeli security were in place (i.e., reassertion of PA control over Gaza as a prerequisite for peace).

Meanwhile, proponents of launching a major ground offensive into Gaza to oust the Hamas leadership had been gaining ground in Israel, and on 11/19, Israel began bulldozing operations to demolish structures, level land, and create defensive berms in the Erez industrial zone to expand its buffer zone and create a staging area. Similar operations were initiated in the abandoned Rafah airport site and near the Kerem Shalom crossing to create a s. Gaza staging area. From the close of the summit, IDF operations against Gaza began to increase. (At least 23 Gazans were killed by the IDF during November, mostly by cross-border fire.) By the end of 11/07, all financial transactions with Gaza were cleared through an Israeli government-run bank to ensure that no money benefit Hamas.

On the Hamas-Fatah front, Fatah organized massive demonstrations in Gaza on 11/12 to mark the anniversary of Arafat's death. The ESF's violent dispersal of up to 200,000 Fatah supporters at a major rally in Gaza City sparked clashes that ended with 7 Palestinians dead, 150 injured, and 450 Fatah supporters arrested (most soon released). Prior to the demonstrations, Hamas had confiscated 1,000s of pro-Arafat posters and memorabilia (whose crossing into Gaza Israel had facilitated) on the grounds that such items could not in good conscience be

allowed to enter when basic goods were restricted. On 11/15, Abbas for the first time publicly called for the ouster of Hamas from Gaza.

As Hamas's control of Gaza entered its fifth month with no prospect of national unity talks, Hamas began to shift from emergency footing to long-term planning for rule of Gaza, reviving central authority and re-organizing security forces to better provide internal security.

December 2007

The first round of PA-Israeli post-Annapolis talks (12/12) was mainly taken up with grievances regarding the situation on the ground, with the PA stating that Israel's ongoing attacks on Gaza undermined its credibility with Palestinians, and Israel demanding that the PA "defeat the terrorist organizations, and assure that there will be no terrorism directed at Israel." (Israel had already declared on 12/2 that it would not be bound by the target date for a final agreement set for year-end 2008, stating that progress would depend on the PA's ability to ensure its security.)

In follow-up to the Annapolis conference, a major donor conference in Paris (12/16) to aid Abbas secured \$7.4 b. of pledges over 3 years. Most of the money would go to the West Bank, with the PA saying it would pay only for basic fuel and electricity to Gaza until the Hamas government was ousted. Responding to the World Bank's warning that the money would be wasted unless Israel significantly eased restrictions on Palestinian movement, Israel agreed to reopen the Sufa crossing (closed 10/07) to about 18 trucks/day of humanitarian goods. (It also agreed, under U.S. pressure, to make confidence-building gestures to bolster Abbas, including allowing some 600 Gazans with foreign student visas and some 2,000 Gazan Hajj pilgrims selected by Abbas's PA to exit the Strip.)

Despite these small gestures, pressures on the Strip were mounting **as the near-total closure entered its sixth month.** Israel increased fuel restrictions on Gaza yet again in December; about 70% of Gazan fuel depots were closed; 400,000 Gazans had no or very limited access to safe drinking water; private sector economic production was at 11% of capacity; 27% of private businesses had closed and of those remaining, 65% were operating at reduced capacity; rolling blackouts were becoming longer; and hospi-

tals were forced to suspend treatments even for seriously ill patients for lack of essential medicines and spare parts.

In such conditions, the governing authorities in Gaza were desperate for the siege to be lifted. Around 12/16, Hamas passed an offer to Israel through MK Yossi Beilin for a cease-fire in Gaza in exchange for ending the siege. On 12/19, Haniyeh granted a TV interview to an Israeli reporter to appeal for a mutual cease-fire in Gaza, and on 12/20 Mubarak hand carried a written offer from Haniyeh to Olmert. Olmert dismissed the offers out of hand, stating that Israel would not deal with Hamas until it met the three preconditions (renunciation of all violence, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and agreement to abide by existing agreements) established earlier.

Hamas-Fatah infighting dropped significantly as external pressures on Gaza increased, though clashes still broke out over ESF attempts to enforce law and order and Fatah challenges to Hamas authority (among challenges from other clans and factions). A major clash in Khan Yunis (on 12/31) erupted during Fatah's anniversary celebrations, with violence spreading across Gaza within hours. The clashes were quickly contained by mutual agreement of the factions, but in the meantime 8 Palestinians had been killed and 60 wounded.

January 2008: Israel Declares "Economic Warfare on Gaza"

The first half of the month saw an upsurge in military action in Gaza (major Israeli raids on al-Bureij r.c., Gaza City, and Khan Yunis; additional IDF air strikes, cross-border fire, and bulldozing operations; Palestinian rocket fire), with a brief pause during Bush's visit (1/9-12) to Israel and Ramallah, during which he acknowledged that the most that could be achieved before he left office might be agreement on the "definition" of a Palestinian state. Immediately after Bush's visit, Israel assassinated 2 AMB members and 3 PRC members and made attempts on at least 2 others; stepped up air strikes on Hamas targets; and made major incursions into Gaza City (1/15). At least 35 Palestinians were killed and more than 70 wounded in these actions. In response, Hamas ended its 7-month moratorium on rocket fire. Palestinians lobbed about 150 rockets into Israel between 1/15 and 1/17, killing an Ecuadorian laborer and injuring 8 Israelis.

On 1/17 **Israel declared “economic warfare on Gaza”** to halt rocket fire and unseat the Hamas-led government. Simultaneously, Israel sealed Gaza’s borders completely—even to humanitarian aid, which had been permitted in very limited quantities since 6/19—and further reduced fuel and electricity imports, while the IDF stepped up air strikes, including a symbolic strike on the vacant PA Interior Min. building in Gaza City, killing 1 bystander and wounding 46. Hamas quickly clamped down on rocket fire, bringing it to near zero by 1/19. Hamas, IJ, and the PFLP appealed to Abbas to halt negotiations with Israel in protest, but Abbas refused.

The effect of the tightened siege of Gaza was immediate: Gaza’s power plant shut down on 1/20, leaving 12 hospitals and at least 50 clinics running on generators reliant upon dangerously limited fuel imports. Electricity and fuel cuts left the Gaza municipality unable to treat waste water, forcing it to dump 40 m. liters/day of untreated sewage into the Mediterranean. The UN reported having only 2 weeks of food stocks to supply 887,000 dependent Gazans and that distribution would have to end within days for lack of fuel for trucks. Rolling blackouts were now up to 12 hrs./day, and 40% of Gazans were without running water. Meat prices doubled.

UN special rapporteur for human rights John Duggard called (1/19) the Israeli measures “collective punishment” and “serious war crimes,” while the PA stated (1/20): “We hope the residents of the Gaza Strip will now realize that Hamas has only brought disaster upon themselves” and that “the only way to resolve the crisis is by getting rid of Hamas.” Under mounting international pressure, Olmert agreed (1/22) to allow in a week’s supply of cooking gas, diesel fuel for hospital generators, limited industrial fuel for Gaza’s power plant, and up to 50 truckloads/day of food and medicine (roughly 1 truckload per 30,000 Gazans).

Hamas had earlier appealed to Egypt to open the Rafah border unilaterally to trade, without results, and on 1/23 it **breached the Rafah border**, with tens of thousands of Gazans flooding into Egypt seeking food, supplies, medical care, respite from the siege, and to see relatives not seen in years. Before Egypt resealed the border on 2/3, some 750,000 had crossed into Egypt at some point during the opening. The gambit to alleviate Gaza’s economic crisis failed: after resealing the border, Egypt, under Is-

raeli and U.S. pressure, banned all exports and allowed in only enough humanitarian aid to preclude humanitarian catastrophe but not enough to meet Gazans’ basic needs.

February–March 2008: Massive Ground Operations in Gaza

A Palestinian suicide attack (2/4) in Dimona, killing 1 Israeli and wounding 11, set off a new cycle of Israeli air strikes and assassinations (17 Palestinians killed, 15 wounded) and Palestinian rocket fire into Israel (6 Israelis wounded). Palestinian fears that a full-scale Israeli operation was imminent seemed confirmed by Israel’s launch on 2/13 of an international media campaign emphasizing the growing threat from Gaza and Israel’s need to act against the terrorists in the interests, not only of its own security but also for the sake of its negotiations with “moderate Palestinians.” Meanwhile, Israel had completed the land-leveling operations in the Erez industrial zone and s. Gaza begun in 11/07, leaving the areas largely vacant.

After a Palestinian rocket damaged a home in Sederot on 2/17 (causing no injuries), Olmert gave (2/17) the IDF a “free hand” to operate against militants in Gaza, warning that Gazans would “not be allowed to live normal lives” as long as Israelis were “targeted by rocket fire.” The escalation of Palestinian rocket fire (with an Israeli boy in Sederot injured on 2/25), IDF assassinations (5 Hamas members in Khan Yunis on 2/27), a Hamas rocket attack (1 Israeli killed and 2 wounded on 2/27), and IDF air strikes across Gaza (5 Palestinians killed and 37 wounded on 2/27) culminated in the IDF launch (2/28) of **Operation Hot Winter** targeting Gaza’s “terrorist infrastructure.” On 2/28 alone, the IDF made more than 20 air strikes, mostly on n. and central Gaza, killing 20 Palestinians and wounding more than 50. Palestinians responded with 31 rockets and 15 mortars into Israel, injuring 2 Israelis. During the night of 2/29–3/1, the IDF launched the largest ground incursion into Gaza since the 2005 disengagement, sending large numbers of infantry troops supported by tanks, helicopters, and warplanes across the border. On 3/1 alone, at least 62 Palestinians were killed and 175 wounded, marking **the deadliest day since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000.** The operation, which was roundly condemned by the UN and the EU for its “disproportionate use of force,” ended when Israel, citing

Secy. Rice's forthcoming visit, began to pull troops out as of midnight on 3/2, completing the withdrawal by 3/3. (The U.S. had resisted Egyptian and EU calls to help broker a Gaza cease-fire on the grounds that a negotiated cease-fire would strengthen Hamas's legitimacy.) The final toll of the 5-day operation was 111 Palestinians (half civilians) and 3 Israelis (1 civilian) dead and more than 400 Palestinians (mostly civilian) and at least 13 Israelis (6 civilians) wounded.

On 3/6, a suicide attack in East Jerusalem killed 8 Israelis and wounded 9. Though the Palestinian had no political affiliation and was believed to be deranged, the attack raised fears of another Israeli assault on Gaza, prompting Egypt to step up talks with Hamas and IJ, convincing them (3/6) to suspend Palestinian rocket fire and observe a unilateral cease-fire as of 3/7. Though Israel continued bulldozing operations inside the Gaza border and firing on Palestinians who strayed near the border fence, it refrained from deep incursions into Gaza as of 3/7. Haniyeh publicly offered (3/12) Israel a formal cease-fire, proposing the lifting of the siege of Gaza and halting of Israeli "assassinations, killings, and raids" in the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for a halt to all Palestinian resistance. Instead of responding officially, Israel within hours assassinated 2 IJ members and 1 AMB member in the West Bank, prompting IJ members in Gaza to resume rocket fire on Israel, which in turn triggered renewed IDF air strikes on Gaza, ending less than a week of calm.

When Operation Hot Winter began, Abbas had come under heavy pressure from Palestinian factions to take a stand, and on 3/2 he suspended peace talks with Israel (which promptly denounced him for violating the Annapolis agreement). Several days later, however, Secy. Rice persuaded (3/5) him to resume the negotiations. Nonetheless, with his popularity among Palestinians deteriorating, Abbas agreed to a Yemeni offer to mediate Fatah-Hamas reconciliation talks, and senior Fatah officials proceeded to the Yemeni capital to meet with senior Hamas officials on 3/18. On 3/23, the officials released a joint statement affirming the unity of the West Bank and Gaza and pledging to resume national unity talks in 4/08 with the goal of returning "the Palestinian situation to what it was before the Gaza incident" in 6/07, Hamas ceding control of Gaza to the PA, and the PA holding new elections immediately. The U.S. and Israel privately expressed strong displeasure

to Abbas, prompting Abbas to declare (3/24) that Fatah members had signed the Yemeni deal in error and that no progress could be made on national unity until Hamas first returned control of Gaza to the PA. Hamas's Mishal attempted to revive the dialogue by inviting (3/31) Abbas to meet with Haniyeh in Gaza "with no conditions," but Abbas said he was "insulted" by the invitation.

Immediately after Abbas's reversal, the IDF began (3/26) to escalate cross-border attacks on Gaza, including major bulldozing operations in al-Qarara (3/26) and Khuza (3/31) and arrest raids into Wadi al-Silqa (3/29) and Dayr al-Balah (3/31). Meanwhile, Olmert had already (3/5) ordered government bureaus to step up diplomatic and information campaigns directed at the international community aimed at maintaining "the legitimacy of, and freedom of action in, continuing to strike at Hamas."

Humanitarian groups reported conditions in Gaza to be the worst they had been since the 1967 occupation. By early 3/07, 80% of Gazans were dependent on food aid, 95% of Gaza industries had ceased operations, and unemployment (for those still seeking work) stood at 40%. The UN reported that Israeli import restrictions had led to hoarding and the emergence of black markets in Gaza, pushing up retail prices, aggravating shortages, and increasingly forcing Gazans to buy on credit.

April 2008

Under U.S. pressure, Abbas and Olmert resumed peace talks on 4/7, with Abbas pledging that final status discussions would continue henceforth "without interruption" (a reference to his brief suspension on 3/2 to protest Operation Hot Winter).

The next day Israel stepped up operations against Gaza, with incursions and air strikes targeting Gaza City (4/8, 4/16), Khan Yunis (4/8, 4/11), Khuza (4/10), al-Bureij r.c. (4/11), al-Qarara (4/15), and Wadi al-Silqa (4/15) that left 14 Palestinians dead and dozens injured, and assassinations of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine's (DFLP) senior Gaza military commander and IJ's Nussayrat r.c. commander. The Palestinian response was a series of joint operations (various combinations of AMB, Hamas, IJ, and the PRCs) targeting IDF bases at the Gaza crossing points into Israel: Nahal Oz (4/9), near Nahal Oz (4/16), and Kerem Shalom (4/19); 3 IDF soldiers and 2 Israeli civilians contractors were killed and 13 soldiers were wounded in these attacks. Israeli

counterstrikes through 4/23 left 10 Palestinian attackers and 30 bystanders dead and 38 bystanders wounded. The IDF also assassinated 3 wanted Gazans and cut all fuel imports to Gaza for a week. The IDF continued cross-border attacks through the end of the month, killing an additional 9 Palestinians, as well as assassinating the head of IJ's al-Quds Brigade (also killing his aide).

With Gaza violence rising, Egyptian envoy Sulayman intervened with the Gaza factions, securing (4/30) the agreement of all 12 factions to observe a formal cease-fire with Israel that would apply first to Gaza (and include a lifting of the siege) and later be extended to the West Bank.

Meanwhile, fuel shortages resulted in the spoiling of 50,000 infant vaccines in Gaza's central pharmacy and continued dumping of raw sewage into the Mediterranean at a rate of 50–60 m. liters/day; 12 municipalities were forced to halt garbage collection, affecting 500,000 Gazans; the last hospital ambulances ran out of gasoline on 4/19; and water and electricity blackouts grew longer.

May 2008

Egyptian envoy Sulayman traveled to Israel on 5/12 personally to offer Olmert the cease-fire proposal agreed to by all Gaza factions on 4/30. Israel formally rejected the deal, but Sulayman continued his efforts to broker a cease-fire. (Meanwhile, Olmert faced new fraud and political corruption charges on 5/2, raising the possibility of his resignation and early elections.)

Israeli attacks on Gaza continued throughout the month, pointedly continuing (contrary to usual practice) even during President Bush's high-profile visit (5/14–16) to celebrate Israel's 60th anniversary (during which he praised Israel's "moral clarity"). Incursions into Abasan and Jabaliya r.c. and air strikes on Gaza City during the Bush visit killed 6 Palestinians. Palestinians responded with rocket fire that struck a mall in Ashkelon, injuring 16 Israelis. The air and artillery strikes, daylong incursions (into Bayt Hanun, al-Bureij r.c., Gaza City, Juhur al-Dik, Khan Yunis, al-Qarara, and al-Shuka), bulldozing operations, and cross-border fire—already near-daily occurrences—escalated after Bush's departure, leaving an additional 35 Palestinians dead and 50 wounded. Palestinian rocket fire continued at a moderate level, killing 2 Israelis and wounding 3 in 2 separate incidents.

As a result of the ongoing siege, Gaza ran completely out of cooking fuel, and its power plant was forced to shut down on 5/11. Most Gazan bakeries were closed for lack of flour imports; Gazans began to mill animal feed for bread.

Intra-Palestinian violence in Gaza, relatively calm since 12/08, remained low, though tensions between Fatah and Hamas were high.

June 2008: A 6-Month Gaza Cease-Fire Begins

The month opened with ongoing IDF operations against Gaza, including incursions into Bani Suhayla (6/1), al-Qarara (6/3), and Khan Yunis (6/5), killing 1 Palestinian and wounding 8. When an IDF drone fired a missile at a home in Khan Yunis, killing a Palestinian child, Hamas retaliated with mortar fire, hitting a factory in Nir Oz, killing 1 Israeli and wounding 2. Israel retaliated (6/5–6) with air strikes on Bayt Lahiya and an undercover raid on Gaza City (apparently a failed assassination attempt), wounding nearly a dozen Palestinians.

Returning from a trip to Washington on 6/6, Olmert warned that his government was weighing a major military incursion into Gaza to halt rocket fire and destroy Hamas. Egyptian envoy Sulayman stepped up cease-fire efforts, traveling to Israel on 6/8 to present Olmert's cabinet with a new Hamas proposal for consideration. Hamas also made the goodwill gesture of transmitting a letter from captured IDF soldier Shalit to his family via former U.S. pres. Jimmy Carter. Olmert agreed (6/11) to delay a major incursion into Gaza to allow Egypt to continue its mediation, but stated that the IDF had been instructed "to prepare for military action in the Gaza Strip according to a rapid time table" if the cabinet gave its authorization.

Even as Sulayman was holding intensive cease-fire talks with Israel and Hamas between 6/7 and 6/16, the IDF and Palestinian factions intensified cross-border attacks in Gaza, leaving another 17 Palestinians dead and 4 Israelis and 10 Palestinians wounded. But early on 6/17, Hamas and Israel agreed "in principle" to a phased, 6-month Gaza cease-fire deal to begin at 6:00 A.M. local time on 6/19 (11:00 P.M. 6/18 EST). Israel would begin to ease the siege on Gaza after Hamas demonstrated its ability to hold all factions in Gaza to the truce. Israel would consider allowing the Rafah crossing to reopen if the truce held for more than 2 weeks

and if significant progress were made on a deal to release Shalit. Hamas also agreed to end all smuggling related to its military operations but not to halt smuggling of commercial goods until Israel lifted its siege.

In the hours before the cease-fire, the IDF assassinated (6/17) 6 AOI members in air strikes on Dayr al-Balah and Khan Yunis and killed another armed Palestinian in an air strike near Gaza City. IJ lobbed a barrage of 33 rockets and 10 mortars into Israeli on 6/18, apparently in retaliation over the IDF killing of 4 of its members in cross-border fire on 6/16, causing light damage but no injuries.

The Gaza cease-fire, though fragile (given the mutual distrust), began positively. During the first days, Israel refrained from military operation against Gaza but made sure that Gazans were aware that the siege was still in place, routinely firing on Palestinian fishing vessels to keep them on or near shore (causing no injuries) and firing warning shots at Palestinians close to the border fence (wounding 2 farmers). Hamas immediately suspended (6/19) armed border patrols conducted jointly with the other factions and moved its members away from border areas. With no rocket or mortar fire from Gaza, Israel increased the amount of food and medicine allowed to enter Gaza by 50% on 6/22. By 6/23, Hamas and Israel, as pledged, began talks via Sulayman regarding Shalit's release in return for a staged Israeli release of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners "with blood on their hands."

The Gaza cease-fire faced its first test on 6/24, when Israel assassinated IJ's Nablus commander and IJ members in Gaza (historically the least willing to agree to a Gaza truce and therefore the hardest to rein in) fired 3 rockets and 1 mortar into Israel, injuring 2 Israelis. Calling the attack a "grave violation" of the truce, Israel resealed Gaza's crossings completely but took no other action, saying it would give Hamas the chance to "discipline" truce violators. Hamas vowed to secure the truce but refused to "act as Israel's police force" by confronting violators. On 6/26, Hamas's Gaza security chief (and former PA interior minister) Said Siyam convened the heads of Gaza's factions to discuss truce adherence, and IJ pledged to coordinate future responses with Hamas. Hamas-affiliated imams focused Friday sermons (6/27) on the need to support the truce in the interests of the Palestinian people. Acknowledging Hamas's efforts, Israel allowed humanitarian imports to Gaza to re-

sume at a rate about 30% higher than before the truce was agreed (but still well below Gazans' basic needs).

As the Hamas takeover of Gaza entered its 2d year, Fatah cadres began to escalate bombings and drive-by shootings targeting the homes of Hamas members and police posts, resulting in damage but no injuries. Similar attacks by suspected Fatah cadres targeted Fatah members who had continued to work for the Hamas-led government since the 6/07 takeover.

July 2008: Some Cross-Border Violence Continues

On 7/1, barely a day after restoring limited humanitarian imports to Gaza, Israel resealed the borders completely again, citing radar indications that a rocket had been launched into Israel (though admitting no rocket fragments had been found). Hamas denied the charge and accused Israel of looking for excuses not to honor the cease-fire. Over the next week, Palestinians fired 1 rocket and 2 mortars into Israel, causing no damage or injuries. On 7/8, Israel agreed to Egypt's request to resume humanitarian imports at the level just before the truce went into effect, but declared that from then on it would close Gaza borders for 1 day for each rocket fired.

Violations continued, with Palestinians twice firing mortars into Israel in response to 2 IDF shooting incidents (7/10 and 7/23) of unarmed Palestinians who strayed near the border, the first one fatal. Hamas attempted to limit the fallout: When the AMB fired 2 mortars into Israel in response to the first incident, Hamas-affiliated police arrested 7 AMB members for firing projectiles. (In the second case, the Palestinians who fired 3 mortars into Israel were unidentified.) Israel took no action in either instance. (The Israeli government recorded a total of 1 rocket and 8 mortars fired during 7/08 in violation of the truce.)

Meanwhile, Sulayman continued talks with Hamas and Israel aimed at freeing Shalit and releasing Palestinian prisoners. Some progress was reported but no details were given, prompting Abbas to warn (ca. 7/25) Olmert that he would dissolve the PA if Israel agreed to release jailed Hamas-affiliated political figures as part of an exchange.

As of 7/22, the UN reported "no significant improvement" in Gaza as a result of the month-old cease-fire, noting that 95% of Gaza industries remained closed;

imports were 26% of what they were before the 1/06 Palestinian elections; gasoline and diesel fuel imports were 21% and 45% of what they were prior to the 1/06 elections; rolling blackouts were continuing at the same level as before the cease-fire; 84 m. liters/day of untreated waste were flowing into the Mediterranean (more than before the cease-fire); and the total ban on exports continued. Unemployment (among those still seeking work) had risen to 45%, and 52% of Gazans were living in poverty.

Intra-Palestinian violence in Gaza spiked on 7/25, when 3 bombs exploded in Gaza City, killing 5 Hamas members and 3 bystanders and wounding 17. Although Fatah denied responsibility, Hamas-affiliated police launched (7/26) a massive arrest campaign targeting Fatah.

Meanwhile, Olmert (facing corruption charges) announced (7/30) that he would not run in the Kadima primaries set for 9/17/08 and would step down as soon as a new party head was named.

August 2008: The Gaza Cease-Fire Takes Hold

After 3 weeks without rocket fire, unidentified Palestinians fired 3 rockets into Israel on 8/11 (no damage or injuries), and Israel sealed Gaza's borders for 1 day (8/12) as punishment. Senior Hamas official (and Gaza's acting FM) Mahmud Zahar issued (8/12) a stern statement stressing the "consensus by all Palestinian factions to respect the truce" and denouncing those who fired the rockets as traitors and collaborators. Through the end of the month, Israel recorded another 5 rockets and 3 mortars fired into Israel (mostly by IJ), none causing damage or injuries. The IDF resealed Gaza's crossings (8/26–28) as punishment. There was no cross-border firing by Israel into Gaza in August.

As of 8/15, the UN reported that Israel was allowing a few new items into Gaza (including limited supplies of cement, clothes, juices, and agricultural materials) but said that overall humanitarian conditions had not significantly improved since the cease-fire began on 6/19. During the 2-month period 6/19–8/19, a total of 7,163 trucks of imports had entered Gaza—34% fewer than the number (10,921) of trucks entering in the single month of 5/07 before the Hamas takeover of Gaza and 47% fewer than the number (13,430) in the single month of 12/05 be-

fore Hamas's 1/06 election victory. Israel allowed imports through the Kerem Shalom crossing for the first time since 4/08 but quietly closed the Sufa crossing, generally allowing only 1 of the 2 commercial crossings to operate at a time. In a new step, Israel barred (8/5) the import of cash to Gaza, further hampering the Hamas government's ability to operate by undermining its ability to pay civil servants' salaries.

Hamas stepped up the arrest campaign targeting Fatah that it began in July, sparking massive clashes in Gaza City on 8/2 when Hamas-affiliated police seized control of the 100,000-resident al-Shuja'iyya neighborhood, conducting house-to-house searches for weapons and suspects. At least 12 Palestinians were killed and 88 were wounded in the clashes, and 188 Fatah members, some senior, fled to the Nahal Oz crossing, where Israel allowed them to transit to the West Bank. (Abbas, who wanted to maintain Fatah's Gaza presence, at first ordered the cadres to return to the Strip, but finally allowed 88 to remain under pressure from Israel, with the others either allowed to return to Gaza by Hamas, or detained or hospitalized in Israel.) By the time the campaign wound down on 8/12, Hamas police had detained 465 Fatah supporters and shut 204 Fatah-affiliated community organizations. (Only a few dozen were allowed to reopen.)

In a further effort to destabilize the acting Hamas government, by the end of the month, PA-salaried teachers and healthcare workers in Gaza allied with Fatah and encouraged by Abbas had gone on strike, thereby undermining the provision of Gaza's basic services. (The strikes were to continue to the end of the year.) Abbas's PA also refused to pay for fuel for Gaza's Water Utility, creating severe water shortages in Rafah.

Under U.S. pressure, Israel and the PA negotiating teams resumed regular final status talks, but they made no progress.

September 2008

Between 9/1 and 9/12, there were no reports either of Palestinian rocket fire into Israel or of Israeli cross-border fire into Gaza. Several minor violations followed. On 9/12, the IDF shot and seriously wounded an unarmed Palestinian who strayed close to the border, and on 9/14 Palestinians fired 1 rocket into Israel (no damage or injuries). Israel shut Gaza crossings through 9/16 but took no other action. On 9/16, IDF troops

entered central Gaza to bulldoze land along the border fence (the first such operation since 6/14/08). Later in the month, Palestinians fired 2 mortars into Israel (no damage or injuries). None of these incidents jeopardized the truce.

Despite the near-total calm, Israel took no steps to ease the siege of Gaza, allowing in only minimal fuel, food, and humanitarian goods. On 9/23, the UN reported, "Although the cease-fire has afforded the populations in southern Israel and Gaza greater security, there has been no corresponding improvement in living conditions for the population in Gaza. Imports are not sufficient to meet basic needs, and the lack of exports continues to gridlock Gaza's economy." Israel also barred Gazans with valid foreign student visas from traveling abroad to start their school year.

On 9/17, Israeli FM Tzipi Livni won Kadima party elections. Olmert formally resigned on 9/21, becoming caretaker PM pending the formation of a new government. On 9/22 Israeli pres. Shimon Peres formally charged Livni with forming a government, giving her 42 days to build a coalition. With the presidential campaign underway in the U.S., no movement on the peace process could be expected until new Israeli and U.S. administrations were in place.

The U.S. Pentagon announced (9/9) a planned \$77-m. sale of 1,000 GBU-39 precision guided bunker-busting munitions to Israel. Israeli military experts noted that the bombs were unlikely to be effective in a strike against Iran, but "could provide a powerful new weapon" against Gaza. (For more details on the GBU-39, see the special document on the Israeli arsenal deployed during OCL in this issue.) Congress approved the sale in late September.

Under the rubric of PA efforts to undermine the Hamas-led government, one of the PA's first acts upon taking over responsibility for running the PA's central pharmacy from the World Health Organization (WHO) on 9/1 was to halt the transfer of medicines and pharmaceutical supplies to Gaza, despite WHO protests.

Continuing its "clean-up campaign" that began with Fatah, Hamas-affiliated police moved to disband the AOI faction in Gaza City, sparking 2 days of heavy clashes (9/15-16) that left 13 Palestinians dead and 45 wounded; police confiscated 32 truckloads of weapons. By mid-9/08, the Hamas leadership began purging Fatah members from the lower ranks of major ministries (e.g., in-

terior, education), solidifying its hold on the former PA bureaucracy. The banking sector, the PA Monetary Authority, and the PA Civil Affairs Min. were left untouched so as not to jeopardize international banking contacts and to leave lines of communication with Israel open to prevent a total collapse of Gaza's economy.

October 2008: The Lowest Level of Violence Since 2000

During October, Israeli-Palestinian violence fell to the lowest level since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000 (in the West Bank as well, as Israel scaled back military raids for the Jewish holidays). Throughout the month, a single Palestinian violation was reported: ca. 10/7, 1 Palestinian rocket was fired into Israel (no damage or injuries). The change was so pronounced that U.S. Secy. of State Rice sent (ca. 10/28) a message to Hamas though a Gulf party acknowledging Hamas's efforts. Several Israeli violations were reported: On 10/3, the IDF fired on 2 unarmed Palestinians near the s. Gaza border and sent troops into the Strip to arrest them and take them to Israel. On 10/27, IDF soldiers fired into Gaza for no apparent reason, breaking a window of a girls' school in Khuza in s. Gaza, lightly injuring 1 girl. On 10/19, the IDF sent bulldozers into Gaza to level land along the n. Gaza border fence. The Israeli navy fired 4 times on Palestinian fishing boats off the Gaza coast (10/4, 10/5, 10/6, 10/31), wounding 2 fishermen, 1 of them seriously.

Despite the marked decrease in violence, Israel continued to maintain a tight siege of Gaza, refusing to increase imports of food, medicines, or basic goods. The total ban on Palestinian travel into and out of Gaza, except in extreme medical cases, remained in place. (Prior to each of the 3 Jewish holidays during the month, Israel allowed greater quantities of food, fuel, and humanitarian goods into Gaza—except for cooking gas, which was cut by 42%—but this was in anticipation of the complete closures during the holidays themselves.) The UN reported (10/15, 10/21) that while the weekly average of food and goods allowed into Gaza was slightly higher than before the cease-fire took effect on 6/19, the volume overall had declined significantly since then (from about 85 trucks/day in early 7/08 to 65 trucks/day by mid-10/08).

Livni continued negotiations with Israeli parties in an effort to form a coalition government, reaching agreements in principle

with Labor and Meretz, and on the cusp of reaching a deal with a third that would give her enough Knesset seats to present a coalition, when she suddenly suspended talks (10/25), informing Peres that she could not form a government. This unexpected move forced Israel to early elections, which were set (10/28) for 2/09.

By mid-10/08, Egypt's Sulayman secured the agreement of Fatah and Hamas to resume national unity talks, which were set to begin on 11/9/08. Discussions immediately began regarding an agenda and final statement for the meeting. On 10/25, the PA launched "Operation Dawn of the Nation," arresting 100s of Hamas members and supporters across the West Bank, compromising the national unity project.

November 2008: Israel Breaks the Gaza Truce

In a dramatic reversal on 11/4, Israel launched a major raid into a residential area e. of Dayr al-Balah in central Gaza, allegedly to destroy a tunnel near the border. The sizeable IDF force occupied 2 Palestinian houses (1 covering the tunnel), wounded 1 Palestinian civilian, and clashed with local Hamas gunmen, marking the first armed exchange since the cease-fire began on 6/19/08. A senior Hamas commander was killed, and 2 other Hamas members and 4 IDF soldiers were wounded. Publicly, Israel accused (11/4) Hamas of plotting to dig under the border fence to capture soldiers and abduct them to Gaza, but separately Israeli defense officials acknowledged (see *Washington Times* 11/20) that Israel wanted to "send Hamas a message." Hamas fired 10 mortars from Gaza towards Israel in retaliation, several of which landed inside Israel, causing no damage or injuries. Israel, instead of holding back as in previous truce violations, retaliated (11/4) with air strikes (the first since the truce began) on Khan Yunis and al-Qarara, killing 5 Hamas members.

The IDF continued operations near Dayr al-Balah overnight on 11/4-5, demolishing the house that allegedly hid the tunnel, bulldozing the surrounding land, and arresting 4 Palestinian women. On 11/5, Hamas and IJ fired about 35 rockets from Gaza into Israel, causing no damage or injuries; and the IDF struck a rocket-launching site in Jabaliya r.c. in n. Gaza, killing 1 IJ member and wounding 2 others (and 2 bystanders). Hamas officials enlisted (11/5) Egypt's help to restore calm and pledged to observe the

cease-fire if Israel halted its attacks. Israel cut off (11/5) all fuel shipments to Gaza, sealed Gaza's crossings indefinitely, and stopped allowing foreign journalists into Gaza.

Over the next several days, daily cross-border exchanges (involving the DFLP, Hamas, and IJ), Palestinian rocket and mortar fire (averaging around 10/day, much of it landing inside Gaza), incidents of IDF bulldozing inside the Gaza border, and 2 IDF air strikes were reported. Both Israel and Hamas repeated pledges to restore the cease-fire if the other side halted attacks, but the retaliations continued, including moderate but sustained Palestinian rocket fire. On 11/14, Hamas declared that Israel was apparently uninterested in restoring the truce and fired 11 Grads, 3 rockets, and a barrage of mortars towards Israel (only 4 Grads landed inside Israel), hitting a house in Sederot, injuring 1 Israeli. Israel retaliated with air strikes on n. Gaza, wounding 2 armed Palestinians. From 11/15 to 11/17, Palestinian rocket and mortar fire returned to a level of 10/day but did not cease. Israel estimated that between 11/4 and 11/17, the Palestinian factions fired around 160 rockets and mortars towards Israel, nearly half of which landed inside Gaza.

By 11/10, after a week of near total closure (only 5 truckloads/day of aid allowed in for a population of 1.5 million), Gaza's humanitarian conditions reached a tipping point. Israel's ban on fuel imports forced Gaza's power plant to shut down (11/10); left Gaza households without running water; and forced rolling blackouts across the Strip of up to 12 hrs./day. Bread rationing resumed. Farmers were unable to feed livestock, forcing them to begin euthanizing their stocks. Shortages of milk, red meat, and fresh produce were widespread. Unable to replenish its stocks, UNRWA was forced to halt (11/13) food distribution to 750,000 refugees—half of Gaza's population—for the 1st time in 60 years, with UNRWA Gaza dir. John Ging stating that "it is unprecedented that the UN is unable to get its supplies in to a population under such obvious distress." The UN's World Food Program warned (11/13) that it was delving into its emergency supplies to feed Gaza's 130,000 nonrefugee poor. The UN officially classified 76% of Gaza's population as below the poverty line (compared to 52% in 7/08). Israel also embargoed 2 shipments of childhood vaccines to Gaza at Ben-Gurion airport. Stocks of 95 of 473 drugs classified as essential for hospitals and clinics to have on

hand, and 174 other medical supplies were entirely depleted because of the PA's refusal to transfer the supplies from Ramallah. The EU (11/14) and UN Secy.-Gen. Ban Ki-moon (11/15) appealed to Israel to immediately lift the siege.

At this time, public indications began to surface that Israel was actively moving toward launching a major offensive against Gaza: On 11/18, Olmert and DM Barak made a secret trip to Amman (confirmed by the Israeli government on 11/20) at the request of King Abdallah, who urged against staging a major military operation. Olmert and Barak pledged to take Jordan's strategic concerns into account but said that Israel must and would take action against Gaza. Abdallah held an emergency meeting with Abbas in Aqaba on 11/20, but no details were released. On 11/19, DM Barak was reportedly given the **final blueprint for Operation Cast Lead** for his approval.

Also on 11/18, the IDF completely halted all imports of aid and fuel into Gaza after Palestinian rockets caused light damage but no injuries inside Israel. The closure sparked serious concern among Palestinian factions about the impact on Gaza's humanitarian situation. Palestinian rocket fire immediately fell off almost entirely. After a week of relative Palestinian quiet, Israel allowed (11/24) 32 truckloads of humanitarian aid, limited fuel, and some currency into Gaza. The PA also allowed (ca. 11/24) its first shipment of medicine from the central store in Ramallah to Gaza since taking over such transfers from the WHO on 9/1. From 11/24 to 11/30, some low-level cross-border exchanges were reported, and Israel maintained a near-total closure of Gaza borders. Israel recorded a total of 126 Palestinian rockets and 71 mortars fired between 11/4 and 11/30; 3 of the mortars fired by the PRCs on 11/28 hit an IDF base at the Nahal Oz crossing, injuring 6 soldiers (1 critically), but Israel did not immediately retaliate. As of 11/30, UNRWA reported that it had been allowed to bring in only 23 truckloads of food since Israel sealed borders on 11/4, whereas a minimum of 15 truckloads/day is needed simply to sustain the basic needs of the refugee population. Gaza's power plant ran out of fuel on 11/30 and was again forced to shut down.

Meanwhile, efforts by Egypt's Sulayman to convene Fatah-Hamas national unity talks broke down, with Hamas leader Mishal announcing (11/8) that Hamas would not attend because of Egyptian and PA refusal to

include on the agenda for discussion items of importance to Hamas and because of their insistence that a final statement endorse the extension of Abbas's presidential term (set to expire in 1/09) to 1/10.

Around the end of 11/08, the U.S. delivered to Israel the GBU-39 bunker busters approved by Congress in 9/08.

December 2008: Run Up to Operation Cast Lead

Between 12/1 and 12/15, Israel maintained a near-total closure on Gaza, allowing in only very limited food, fuel, and humanitarian supplies. Palestinians fired at least 50 rockets and mortars into Israel (mostly mortars), with no damage or injuries reported. The IDF regularly responded with air strikes on launch sites (killing 2 Palestinian bystanders and wounding 2 by 12/15), and it conducted at least 1 incursion into Khan Yunis (12/11) to arrest wanted Palestinians.

Even with slightly increased imports since 11/24 (around 11 truckloads/day), 75% of bakeries were closed for lack of flour; Palestinians were receiving only a fraction of the fuel needed for basic daily functioning (20% of industrial fuel for Gaza's power plant, 5% of cooking gas, 4% of benzene, 3% of diesel); poverty crept to 80%; and banks closed again (12/4) for lack of currency. The UN appealed (12/4) to Israel to allow in vital spare parts to maintain Gaza's electricity, water, and sanitation utilities and other basic infrastructure. In response, Israel allowed (12/9-11) in 70 truckloads of food and medicine, a month's supply of chlorine to treat wastewater, enough fuel for Gaza's power plant to restart on 12/11 (it shut down again on 12/15 for lack of fuel), and \$25 m. in shekels (not enough to pay the salaries of Gaza's civil servants or for banks to reopen). The PA allowed its 2d shipment of pharmaceutical supplies (14 truckloads) to Gaza.

On 12/14, Damascus-based Hamas leader Mishal declared that given Israel's ongoing siege and cross-border strikes, Hamas would not extend the 6-month truce when it officially expired on 12/19. Gaza-based Hamas officials, on the other hand, stated (12/14) willingness to extend the truce, and the same day opened talks with other Gaza factions to reimpose a total cease-fire. It also arrested several members of smaller factions for firing rockets in an effort to restore calm.

On 12/15, the IDF assassinated a senior IJ commander in Jenin, prompting IJ members

in Gaza to fire (12/16-17) some 3 dozen rockets into Israel, injuring 2 Israelis and causing light damage. Israel responded with air strikes and surface-to-surface missile fire on IJ targets in Bayt Hanun and Jabaliya r.c., killing 3 IJ members and 2 bystanders, and an air strike on a suspected weapons cache in Khan Yunis, damaging 7 homes but causing no injuries. By 12/18, Hamas officials in Gaza were ready to declare that they would not renew the 6-mo. cease-fire. With the truce officially over, Palestinians (mostly the AMB and IJ) fired some 40 rockets and 32 mortars into Israel between 12/18 and 12/21, causing light damage but no injuries. The IDF responded with air strikes and cross-border fire on launch sites, killing 1 AMB member and wounding 5 Palestinians. Israel reduced imports to Gaza once again, forcing UNRWA to suspend aid deliveries for lack of food imports for a 2d time on 12/18.

On 12/21, the Israeli cabinet at its weekly session gave the IDF a green light to attack unspecified Hamas targets in Gaza (in addition to continuing strikes on rocket-launching sites), with reports suggesting that authorization had been given for a ground invasion of Gaza to oust Hamas. Hamas leaders immediately went underground. The cabinet also authorized the Israeli FMin. to launch an international public relations campaign (briefings to foreign diplomats, phone calls and meetings with foreign leaders) to enlist support for a military offensive against Gaza. Acting FM Livni (12/21) held teleconferences with UN Secy.-Gen. Ban, Secy. of State Rice, and the FMs of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia; and she dispatched (12/22) diplomats to international capitals to lobby for support for Israel in the face of rocket attacks.

On 12/22, Hamas's leadership called on all Gaza factions to halt their fire for 24 hours as a gesture to Israel to show seriousness about restoring a truce, and Hamas official Zahar appeared on Israeli TV to express Hamas's interest in a new cease-fire in exchange for allowing regular deliveries of food, electricity, and fuel into the Strip. Meanwhile, senior Israeli security officials, speaking anonymously, stated (*Yedi'ot Abaronot* 12/23) that IDF "preparations for a military operation are continuing as planned. As far as we are concerned, the clock is ticking down to a military operation." Israel's Homefront Command began (12/23) several days of exercises to test lo-

cal responses to Palestinian rocket fire, with communities far north of Gaza (e.g., Ashdod, Ashqelon, Kiryat Gat) participating for the first time.

After IDF troops on the n. Gaza border fatally shot (12/23) 3 Hamas members laying a roadside bomb near the border fence, Hamas fired (12/24) 80 rockets and mortars towards Israel, striking as far as 12 mi. into Israel (farther than most rockets to date) and damaging a factory, home, and several other structures but causing no injuries. Israel responded with air strikes on Rafah, killing 1 Hamas member and wounding 2.

That night (12/24), Israeli DM Barak gave the cabinet a detailed, 5-hr. briefing on IDF plans for a major offensive against Gaza and secured unanimous approval to launch the operation. Anonymous IDF officials told the Israeli press (12/25) that Israel had completed preparations for a major operation against Gaza that would probably begin with "surgical air strikes" followed by a ground offensive. Olmert made a rare appearance (12/25) on al-Arabiyya TV to warn Gazans of harsh retaliation if rocket fire continued. Livni, in Cairo at Egyptian pres. Mubarak's invitation for talks on restoring the truce, rejected his call for a new cease-fire. Meanwhile, on 12/25 and 12/26, Palestinians fired 30 rockets and mortars into Israel, causing no damage or injuries.

On 12/26, DM Barak gave the IDF chief of staff, head of military intelligence, and director of Shin Bet the final go-ahead to launch the Gaza offensive. Olmert and his senior staff began quietly briefing opposition leaders and prominent political figures of the impending operation. Israel allowed a final 100 truckloads of humanitarian goods and fuel into Gaza.

Operation Cast Lead began on 12/27 at 11:25 A.M. local time (4:25 A.M. EST), with a massive "shock and awe" air campaign followed by periodic air strikes throughout the day. The IDF recorded a total of 170 sorties against 150 targets, killing at least 228 Palestinians, wounding more than 700, marking the highest single-day death toll and Israel's largest sustained offensive against the Palestinians since 1948. The operation continued through Obama's inauguration on 1/20/09 (for details see the Chronology, Quarterly Update, and special documents section of this issue); Israel declared a unilateral cease-fire on 1/18 but did not complete withdrawal of forces until 1/21.